



University of Pennsylvania  
**ScholarlyCommons**

---

Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2014-2015:  
Color

Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research  
Fellows

---

5-2015

# Documenting Disremembrance: Histories of Loss in Contemporary Chinese Representation

Kimberly Schreiber  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2015](http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2015)

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

---

Schreiber, Kimberly, "Documenting Disremembrance: Histories of Loss in Contemporary Chinese Representation" (2015).  
*Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2014-2015: Color*. 9.  
[http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2015/9](http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2015/9)

This paper was part of the 2014-2015 Penn Humanities Forum on Color. Find out more at <http://www.phf.upenn.edu/annual-topics/color>.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2015/9](http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2015/9)  
For more information, please contact [libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Documenting Disremembrance: Histories of Loss in Contemporary Chinese Representation

## **Abstract**

In places like contemporary China, where legal adjudication for past wrongdoings is impossible, an aesthetic engagement with the experience of loss has become essential to activating these historical remains and undermining violent narratives of progress. Tracing several generations' aesthetic responses to the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and the present day influx of global capital, I advocate for a specific type of aesthetic practice that elides the distinction between the documentary method and abstract practice. By deliberately conflating these categories I argue that these works are united in their quest to dismantle dominant ideologies, and undermine authoritative narratives by making visible their flaws and contradictions with everyday reality. Moreover, my research illuminates an evolving relationship to the documentary method – one that expands and challenges existing definitions of realism. Ultimately, my research is based on an ethical framework which demands a reorientation of our historical perspective, and a new understanding of history that is not couched in teleological notions of progress.

## **Disciplines**

Comparative Literature

## **Comments**

This paper was part of the 2014-2015 Penn Humanities Forum on Color. Find out more at <http://www.phf.upenn.edu/annual-topics/color>.

**Documenting Disremembrance:  
Histories of Loss in Contemporary Chinese Representation**

**Kimberly Schreiber**

2014-2015 Andrew W. Mellon Undergraduate Fellow  
Penn Humanities Forum

Comparative Literature Undergraduate Thesis  
University of Pennsylvania  
Faculty Advisor: Kevin Platt  
May, 2015

## Table of Contents

Introduction: <i>The Angel of History</i> –	3
Chapter One: <i>Toward the Past</i> –	16
Chapter Two: <i>In the Present</i> –	32
Afterword: <i>Toward Unknown Futures</i> –	67
Bibliography –	73
Appendices –	76

## Introduction

### *The Angel of History*

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

– Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History

**We are often told** that history can only be constituted once we are outside of it.

Time and distance allow it to solidify into a fixed, immutable backdrop against which our present selves be differentiated and defined. After the passing of a twentieth century littered with the remains of lost bodies, origins, and truths, it has become harder than ever before to stand outside and gain access to an Historical reality. More and more, we are certain that those who greedily grab hold of History to create ossified, absolutist narratives do so on dubious ethical and political grounds. In his seminal text “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), Walter Benjamin voices his skepticism over totalizing conceptions of history, which inevitably occupy the empathic position of the victor.<sup>1</sup> Rather than advocate on behalf of an alternative, but equally universal ideological position, Benjamin abandons any notion of history as couched in a teleological, linear model of progress. Instead, Benjamin argues that history can only be accurately viewed by illuminating the neglected fragments of marginalized pasts.

Harnessing Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus” as an aesthetic catalyst, Benjamin imagines an Angel of History who is able to see the suffering of the oppressed and to view

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 256-257.

history as an accumulation of ruin. With Benjamin, who refuses to champion any single, linear historical narrative, the Angel of History strives not to repair these shards of rubble into a unified whole with which to overturn formerly oppressive versions of history. Instead, Benjamin's Angel is liberated from linear modes of temporal patterning, viewing all of history as an equal, amorphous heap of necessarily partial and inevitably misremembered remains. Now, in the twenty-first century, we occupy the Angel's position in many ways. We cast our anguished gaze over the past, attempting to make sense out of the universal experience of tragedy and loss. But although the Angel's look is egalitarian and unbiased, the Angel's body remains paralyzed; its wings are pinned back by the ceaseless storm of progress. The figure of Benjamin's Angel is not an inherently hopeful one, as its agency to imagine and create a new future remains in check.

Thus, our project here is not only to align ourselves with the Angel's gaze by properly and ethically attending to catastrophes of the past, but also to mobilize the Angel's body by untethering ourselves from fixed, teleological historical narratives in our own time. First, in places like the People's Republic of China, where the redemption of marginalized pasts through legal or political processes is not possible, the time has come to engage with these traumas through artistic means. Only by activating these remains through aesthetic practice can we see *as* Benjamin's Angel of History. Second, we must turn to the essential question of how to confront the erasure of alternative spaces and ideals that persists in our own moment. Resisting the temptation to restore alternative narratives into a unified, knowable whole, we can perhaps be empowered to destabilize harmful grand narratives of progress, which have been used to justify many of the twentieth century's greatest atrocities, thereby imagining a future in which we are liberated from seemingly inexorable cycles of suffering and violence.

In places like contemporary China, where legal adjudication for past wrongdoings is impossible, an aesthetic engagement with the experience of loss has become essential to activating these historical remains and renewing our relationship to past suffering. Intervening in static theories of trauma, such as those advanced by Shoshana Felman and Dominick Lacapra, which are predicated on open and just political systems, this paper will advocate for certain types of aesthetic practice to engage in an open, ongoing, and dynamic relationship with a malleable history. Harnessing the 2008 Beijing Olympic Ceremony as an anchoring example of authoritative aesthetic representation, from which histories of loss are either absent or redeemed in order to buttress stories of national becoming, this paper will advocate for an alternative aesthetic practice that elides the distinction between the documentary method and abstraction. Through this transgression of categorical distinctions, I argue that aesthetic practice can both attend to the reality of suffering, as well as gesture to that which is unrepresentable about the traumatic experience. By deliberately conflating these categories, these particular aesthetic projects are united in their implicit quest to dismantle dominant ideologies, which continually silence and bury alternative histories. Rather than propagate their own, equally universal counter-histories, these representations of history undermine authoritative narratives by making visible their flaws and contradictions with everyday reality.

At the heart of this subversion lies the battle over representation itself, which risks being co-opted as a tool to reinforce and propagate dominant ideologies. Keenly aware of this possibility, the artists and filmmakers discussed in this paper engage in genre ambiguity to subject representation itself to critical scrutiny, gesturing towards the limitations and ethical burdens of engaging an ineffable history through aesthetic means. By tracing artistic responses to

the Cultural Revolution, as well as to China's pivot away from socialist ideals and toward a capitalist framework, this paper intervenes in widely accepted Western narratives of representation's increasing inability to access a commonly accepted social and historical reality. I argue that the documentary method, when blended with abstract or narrative fiction practices, remains crucial to engaging histories of loss. All too often, documentary films are posited as the product of man's crude desire to capture or evidence reality. The masculine arrogance that underpins this form of realism is the same anthropocentrism that engenders violent narratives of progress. Both are predicated on and perpetuate the myth that promises human beings mastery over the world. However, through my reading of several contemporary Chinese documentaries, I demonstrate that interrogating this realist aesthetic, as well as the progress narratives with which they are intimately related, is a natural, organic part of documentary practice. This investigation shows that documentary is a malleable, evolving critical methodology that is capable of expanding and interrogating existing definitions of realism.

**Perhaps there are none** on earth more in need of Benjamin's Angel of History than those living within the tenuously unified national boundaries of the People's Republic of China. Sharing the Angel of History's shocked, despondent gaze toward the thinly veiled remains of the past, the nation is blown toward a future over which the ordinary citizen has no control. While incidents like the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre remain deeply repressed, taboo subjects, present day violence as a result of urbanization and industrialization are obscured by dominant, neoliberal voices. Under the suddenly ubiquitous emblem of the bulldozer, the continued erasure of present day spaces and bodies is predicated on the



overarching, oppressive narratives of progress woven by authoritative power structures, presided over by the Communist Party of China. With limited access to the past and marginal influence over the future, the question of how to defy the Angel's fixed rigidity in our contemporary moment has become essential. In spite of the growth of trauma theory in response to historical cataclysms such as the Holocaust, there are few tools available to productively unpack the histories of nations like China, whose losses were neither inflicted by an outside, alien group, nor adjudicated in an open, public dialogue.

In their recent volume *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David Eng and David Kazanjian present a collection of essays that engage with the remains of the twentieth century's resounding catastrophes. Their efforts stem from a desire to animate the image of Benjamin's angel, who, propelled uncontrollably and blindly toward the future, echoes our contemporary paralysis over how to constructively mobilize the wreckage of the past. In this essential pivot from the past toward the future, the volume attempts to depathologize melancholia, alternatively emphasizing its creative, social, and political facets.<sup>2</sup> This novel rethinking of loss as a productive stimulus is intrinsically linked to a reciprocal relationship to history – one which not only acknowledges the persistence of an historical reality with which we must contend, but also allows for the malleability and agency of that very history.

Eng and Kazanjian state: "While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects."<sup>3</sup> Thus, reconceptualizing loss and

---

<sup>2</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

melancholia as a creative condition demands our present autonomy and agency to imagine a new, unknown future – one that is free from violence and suffering. Empowered with this novel framework, it becomes possible to accept our partial, contingent relationship to an unrelenting past, while engaging productively with the marginalia of our present moment. An effort to grapple with the lingering remains of the profound violence of the last century, the framework expounded in *Loss* is at the same time an interrogation of current theories of trauma that stigmatize or fail to attend to the complicated, ongoing process of mourning histories that cannot be mastered.

Dominick Lacapra articulates one such theoretical model in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Lacapra stresses that maintaining a fundamental distinction between historical loss and transhistorical absence is essential to “working through” a traumatic past. While losses are specific to certain spatial and temporal coordinates, such as the personal loss of a loved one or a broader loss due to a genocide or apartheid, absence occurs on a structural level, destabilizing the ultimate, metaphysical conditions through which meaning is created. For Lacapra, effective methods of working through loss are predicated on this crucial difference, thereby allowing loss to be attended to through legal and political means that work within the rhetorical purview of the traumatic experience. However, absence, as a more lasting, incomprehensible trauma, cannot be worked through in this way. Lacapra writes: “Absence, along with the anxiety it brings, could be worked through only in the sense that one may learn better to live with it and not convert it into a loss or lack that one believes could be made good.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Dominick Lacapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 65.

Unlike an experience of loss, which leaves behind a repairable and definable lacuna, an experience of transhistorical absence is beyond apprehension and permanent, transgressing corporeal and generational boundaries. Ultimately, Lacapra merely gestures toward the possibility of attending to these deeper, structural traumas. He argues that legacies of loss must first be worked through to confront transhistorical absence, thereby creating “more desirable social and political institutions and practices” that can provide alternative methods for making sense of the world.<sup>5</sup> This framework is effective for interpreting traumas like the Holocaust – a catastrophe which has been thoroughly interrogated through open legal channels and addressed through a shared ethical consensus. However, Lacapra’s model reaches its conceptual limit in addressing historical losses that have not been fully disclosed or accounted for through legal means, as well as structural traumas that are actively concealed and silenced by authoritative regimes. Even under the most ideal circumstances, the lofty aim of learning from past traumas to prevent future violence is an extraordinary undertaking. How then, in places like China where the present moment resounds with silent mourning can continually violent, dominant narratives of progress be unseated and alternative histories be heard?

This question also remains unanswered in a provocative essay on legal justice in the wake of the Holocaust by Shoshana Felman, exemplifying the limitations of current theories of trauma to attend to acts of violence that cannot be made legible through legal or political means. Felman articulates two, dialectically interdependent channels of interpretation that allow us to cope with loss – the processes of the law and aesthetic practice. While trials and other legal proceedings bring a “conscious closure to the trauma of war,” art is essential to “mourn the losses and to face

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 85.

up to what in traumatic memory is not closed and cannot be closed.”<sup>6</sup> Felman mobilizes Hannah Arendt’s seminal work “Eichmann in Jerusalem” and Claude Lanzmann’s iconic documentary *Shoah* to encapsulate the productive tension between legal practice and art. For Felman, the event is made fully visible in the middle ground between the law’s delineation of the traumatic event’s shape and contours, and art’s ability to gesture to that which exceeds our understanding.

Again, Felman’s framework fails to acknowledge the traumas which continually persist in the shadowy recesses of contemporary life at the behest of history’s authors. Thus, in circumstances where the law cannot be harnessed to interpret the scope of the traumatic event, art becomes the only viable conduit for maintaining a productive dialogue with the experience. In the place of an open justice system, the aesthetic is burdened not only with encouraging an empathic, abstract engagement with what remains, but also with mitigating our critical distance from the event. The following paper is a discussion of aesthetic practice in contemporary China that operates within this historically given set of constraints, containing traumatic experience through a necessary engagement with the real, while simultaneously attending to suffering that cannot be publicly adjudicated. The representations of traumas included in this paper undermine and interrogate the historical, authoritative narratives on which China’s recent transformation through marketization, globalization, and unbridled urbanization is founded, capturing precarious glimpses of a contemporary world on the brink of erasure.

In another departure from classic critical treatments of collective trauma, the cases I will examine here also attend to suffering through an engagement with abstract artistic practice.

---

<sup>6</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Theaters of Justice” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 27 No. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: Winter, 2001), 202.

While Felman acknowledges the necessity for art to bring us close to one another's suffering, her discussion of the aesthetic revolves solely around documentary practice and fails to attend to abstract art and its potential to engage with acts of violence. Perhaps counterintuitively, abstract art is crucial in opening up productive possibilities for the ethical adjudication when "objective" channels of documentation are closed or distorted. While the documentary method is often harnessed to interpret traumatic experience, engaging with archival materials and witness testimonials to determine the scope of past violence, there are limits to what it can achieve and represent. Typically, documentaries engage with factual accounts and witness testimonials, in turn becoming a part of the archive on which they depend. Criticisms levied at documentary practice and its archival foundation often suggests the danger that such a work may become yet another dusty relic of faraway catastrophe. In his essay "Between Memory and History," Pierre Nora explores the limitations of this aesthetic channel and the archive to which it is inextricably linked, expressing his wariness over our contemporary moment's incessant need to archive. He describes "the obsession with the archive that marks our age" as an attempt to achieve "at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past."<sup>7</sup> Seemingly compiled for an imaginary horizon in which the facticity of the event will be questioned, archives uncritically gather information, failing to attend to the more generative affective, empathic modes of engagement (categorized by Nora as "memory") on which a future that can cope with the ethical burdens of a violent history is predicated. Rather, documentary strives to historicize the event as truth, ultimately foreclosing the possibility for the event to serve as a

---

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," *Representations* 26 (1989), 13.

creative or generative stimulus. Furthermore, Nora condemns conventional documentaries and their archival counterparts' ability to conceal institutional and ideological perspectives. Thus, while they share the Angel of History's orientation toward the past, they ultimately can reify potentially violent narratives of progress, supplanting totalizing historical narratives with their own, equally universal visions of the past.

In an alternative, but equally damning critique of documentary practice, Dominick Lacapra writes of the medium's potential to engender the viewer's over-identification with the victim. Lacapra points to the failures of Lanzmann's *Shoah*, arguing that the overbearing directorial presence facilitates an "acting out" of the experience of the Holocaust in which "one relives the past as if one were the other."<sup>8</sup> In other words, documentary practice can fail to maintain the critical distance required for the productive process of "working through." Nora and Lacapra's divergent reactions to archival documentaries illuminate the multifaceted failure of a purely documentary approach to the traumatic experience – one that depends on realist traditions such as witness testimonials. As a result, documentary practice either fails to apprehend that which is ultimately unrepresentable about the traumatic experience, or it seems to violate that which is inherently unspeakable about individual suffering.

On the other end of the theoretical spectrum, Jill Bennett responds to an additional negligence in trauma studies, examining the potential of non-narrative, non-representational forms of aesthetic practice to engage with the traumatic experience in her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Bennett abandons documentary and its problems of

---

<sup>8</sup> Lacapra, 148.

“identification, mimesis, and appropriation.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, she advocates an abandonment of “realist aesthetics” which depend on the embodied presence of a victim and their transmission of a true, lived experience.<sup>10</sup> By challenging a framework that insists upon art as a conduit for a personal narrative, Bennett additionally circumvents the criticisms levied at purely artistic renderings of horror that are couched in an anxiety toward “the gaze.” According to this sentiment, the viewer is implicated in the position of the perpetrator through the camera, potentially dehumanizing the victim in an act of voyeurism.<sup>11</sup>

While Bennett’s framework is useful in considering the farthest reaches of abstraction, it ultimately forces us to choose between documentary and non-representational practice, inevitably privileging one mode of engagement over another and condemning looking as an inherently dubious act. Although a discussion of “the gaze” is beyond the scope of this paper, the arguments here inherently affirm looking, even at a body or a victim, as a potentially constructive, empathic act.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Bennett’s framework affirms the rigid binary distinction between documentary and abstraction, relying on absolute, fixed understandings of each mode. This method relies on an examination of an aesthetic practice that strongly and

---

<sup>9</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Trauma, Affect, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>11</sup> For resonant examples of these criticisms, see Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973) and Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> These arguments align with those made by Susan Sontag in her later work, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), in which she powerfully concludes the constructive value of forgetting by looking at necessarily incomplete images of suffering: “To make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.” (115).

overtly cleaves to either end of the spectrum. As a result, reflexive, multilayered works which mobilize generative friction between documentary and abstract modes of representation are neglected, and their potential to engage with historical remains is marginalized. This paper seeks to examine artistic practice which operates in the liminal space between these two aesthetic modes, contending that by transgressing boundaries and genre distinctions art can perform the function of both legal and artistic practice in the face of actively silenced or buried remains. In the spirit of these blurred boundaries, the arguments here will revolve around contemporary Chinese aesthetic practice that is indebted both to abstract art or narrative fiction, as well as to the documentary method.

In focusing on aesthetic practice which actively elides this rigid binary, it is tempting to do away with the distinction between documentary and fictive modes of engagement altogether. This, however, is neither my own aim nor that of the artists and filmmakers discussed in this paper. Rather, the frameworks established here, in addition to the examples included, rely heavily on the necessary gap between these methods. The difference between documentary and fiction with which this paper is concerned is not an ontological one; instead, it lies in the expectations prompted by each respective method for the viewer. In his working toward a poetics of documentary practice, Bill Nichols makes a similar argument, writing “taking a text in isolation, there is nothing that absolutely or infallibly distinguishes documentary from fiction...the distinguishing mark of documentary may be less intrinsic to the text than a function of the assumptions and expectations brought to the process of viewing the text.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 24.



According to Nichols, this interpretive endeavor is a learned process – one based on prior, already established habits of viewing, as well as on ideologically inflected assumptions about the nature of our world and how it should be represented on screen. It is through the reflexive questioning and even subversion of these expectations that the aesthetic examples discussed in this paper incite a critical engagement with historical losses and the authoritative processes which bury them, examining the limitations of representation and challenging the viewer to relinquish the sheltering perceptual anchors either of documentary or abstraction. By reevaluating the binaries that shape our understanding of trauma and the way that it can be represented, we can begin to attend to suffering that remains concealed to the present day. In this way, we can not only align ourselves with the Angel of History's gaze, but also animate its lifeless form, unseating persistent, teleological narratives of progress to imagine alternative futures that are free from violence.

## Chapter One

### *Toward the Past*

**Among the various ways** in which countries construct and display themselves to external audiences, the Olympic Games is perhaps one of the most powerful forms of cultural display available to individual nations.<sup>14</sup> Spending an estimated 2.4 billion dollars alone on arenas and venues, as well as an additional 35-40 billion dollars remodeling the city in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing clearly was conscious of the magnitude of the Olympics as an opportunity for China to present itself on the world stage as a forceful cultural, political, and economic entity. This self-fashioning came to a head during Beijing's opening ceremony, which was orchestrated by blockbuster Chinese director Zhang Yimou. The globally revered auteur engineered one of the most universally memorable and respected Olympic spectacles to date, capturing the attention of nearly fifteen percent of the world's population.<sup>15</sup> Writers have dubbed the event China's "coming out party," thereby articulating the Olympics as an opportunity for China to construct its image for the world.<sup>16</sup>

Expanding on this idea, Wu Zhiyan, Janet Borgenson, and Jonathan Schroeder, in their book *From Chinese Brand Culture to Global Brands*, devote an entire chapter to the

---

<sup>14</sup> Marice Rouch, *Mega-events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture*, (New York:Routledge, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Jon Swaine, "Beijing Olympics," *Telegraph UK*, (August 12, 2008), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/2545106/Beijing-Olympics-Opening-ceremony-watched-by-15-per-cent-of-worlds-population.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen A. Greyser, "Three Levels of Branding at Beijing," *Harvard Business Review*, August 6, 2008.

Opening Ceremony, writing “We see the Opening Ceremony as an expression of China’s aspirations – a cultural, consumer, strategic branding event that showcases a sophisticated, yet earnest and nostalgic, effort to position China as a modern economic, political, and cultural power with a long historical and cultural legacy.”<sup>17</sup> The chapter goes on to focus on the way in which Beijing’s Opening Ceremony markets an “Imagined China” as a global brand by artfully negotiating the intersection between local and global, as well as past, present, and future. For the purposes of this portion of my paper, the Opening Ceremony’s most significant branding opportunity is in its representation of China’s history as an uncomplicated narrative of cultural and technological innovation, eliding all consideration of violence and loss.

The Opening Ceremony was divided into two distinct yet continuous halves, together positing China’s rise on the world stage as a logical, seamless step in the nation’s historical narrative. While the first portion “Brilliant Civilization” provided a majestic tour of China’s five-thousand year history, the second half “Glorious Age” imagined our future world with unmistakably Chinese characteristics.<sup>18</sup> The first half of this aesthetic project morphed China’s tumultuous, violent history into an organic, grand narrative of harmony and progress. In the ceremony’s establishing sequence, a rigidly choreographed brigade of 2008 drummers beat *fou* drums outfitted with LED lighting panels. A 3000 year old technological achievement of Bronze

---

<sup>17</sup> Wu Zhiyan, Janet Borgenson, Jonathan Schroeder, “The 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony,” *From Chinese Brand Culture to Global Brands* (London:Palgrave MacMillan,2013), 79.

<sup>18</sup> James Leibold, “The Beijing Olympics and China’s Conflicted National Form,” *The China Journal* 63, January 2010, 3.

Age China, the *fou* drums unite the Chinese population through a shared history and culture.<sup>19</sup>

Partway through the drumming performance, the stadium lights were turned off, suddenly casting the entire scene in darkness. Lifting glowing red sticks into the air, the drummers continued playing in unison without missing a beat. Whether basked in light or shrouded in darkness, this sequence seems to suggest that the Chinese population will remain fiercely united, transcending all historical obstacles.

For the remainder of the “Brilliant Civilization” sequence, over 15,000 performers united to reenact the great achievements of Chinese history, highlighting ancient innovations such as Chinese printmaking, written characters, opera, and maritime exploration. The entire narrative was staged on a giant, moveable LED hand-scroll, which was projected onto the floor of the stadium to aesthetically and symbolically unify the sequence. Culminating in a rousing performance of Qing Dynasty culture, the first half of the ceremony comes to a close with the recreation of a lavishly-decorated, ancient palace. Accompanied by a rousing score, 32 red pillars adorned with ornate, gold dragons extend skyward from the stadium floor, evoking the colors and architecture of the Forbidden City. After this climactic scene, the performance cuts to an aerial view of the Bird’s Nest stadium, displaying an impressive exhibition of fireworks and marking the end of this “Brilliant Civilization.” Suddenly, the “Glorious Age” portion of the ceremony begins as a hopeful, delicate piano melody propels us from ancient China into the present day.

Through this aesthetic manipulation, an undeniably vast temporal gap between the 1918 fall of the Qing Dynasty and our contemporary historical moment is left unattended, providing a

---

<sup>19</sup> Zhiyan, Borgenson, Shroeder, 84.

glaring indication of one of the main mechanisms in this carefully crafted revision of China's cultural memory. The nation's violent twentieth century is noticeably and purposefully absent, thereby glossing over the nation's revolutionary history, its colonial occupation by Western powers, its struggles with the Kuomintang and Japan, and the Cultural Revolution.<sup>20</sup> This demonstrates how aggressively and overtly China is willing to construct an authoritative version of history, editing their narrative to bury the remains of violent pasts and to make whole a fractured, highly contested history. The Opening Ceremony is a representation of history from which all loss and violence is noticeably absent. When we look at the past through this lens, we are not aligned with the view of Benjamin's Angel of History; rather, we are gazing at history through the eyes of the victor. In this way, the Olympic Ceremony both throws into relief the deep ethical and political implications of aesthetic engagements with history, which at once can conceal and illuminate histories of loss, as well as makes visible the challenge for current theories of trauma to attend to Chinese suffering.

The aim of harnessing the Olympic Opening Ceremony as a deeply troubling representation of Chinese history is not to fuel Western indignation over a despotic, Oriental regime, which is rooted in ideas of China's post-1949 "backwardness" under the authority of Communist leadership. Rather, the goal here is to understand the political and ethical stakes of using aesthetics to buttress authoritative ideologies and occlude suffering – a phenomenon that pervades the ostensibly "free" world as well. While attending to the specificities of Chinese history remains crucial for these purposes, mobilizing these frameworks for a newfound

---

<sup>20</sup> Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, "Alternative Archive", *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record* (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2010), 152.

engagement with the nearly universal experience of loss may be one of the results of this project. Considering the desire of dominant parties to harness aesthetic practice in order to repress and occlude histories of loss, how can certain types of representation ethically attend to traumatic pasts? To begin answering this question, I turn to the work of contemporary Chinese artist Xiaoze Xie, whose photorealist paintings engage with China's specific traumatic past as well as the global experience of loss through a masterful blending of documentary photography and abstract artistic practice.

**In a 2010 lecture** at Bucknell University, Xiaoze Xie provocatively stated: "I am by no means a revolutionary: I don't want to give up painting for installation or video; I don't want to give up the figurative for the abstract; I don't want to give up the political for the cultural; I don't want to give up my Chinese-ness for the universal; I would never give up sincerity or beauty for irony. I want all of these in my work."<sup>21</sup> Xie's fierce antagonism toward rigid polarities can be read as a direct response to his early years as an artist spent living and working in China's turbulent post-Mao era. At first a reluctant student of architecture, Xie fully realized his artistic ambitions in a world framed by stark binaries: communism versus capitalism, tradition versus modernity, Chinese versus Other.<sup>22</sup>

Far from being solely a political phenomenon, the tendency to cleave to absolutes is manifest in attempts to represent the experience of trauma and violence – events that rupture the

---

<sup>21</sup> Excerpts from lecture at Bucknell University, Oct. 14, 2010, in conjunction with touring exhibition "Xiaoze Xie: Amplified Moments (1993-2008)" found on Stanford University website, accessed April 15th, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> From a conversation with the artist on March 1, 2014.

way in which historical narratives are woven and defy integration into our cultural memory. As I suggest in the introduction above, the documentary method and abstract practice are often pitted against one another in their capacity to attend to traumatic pasts. In contrast, the work of Xie powerfully exemplifies the productive negation of this binary. While Xie harnesses archival material such newspaper articles and photographs as documentary evidence, he abstracts away from these sources by repainting the photographs onto striking, enormous canvases. Through his artistic practice, Xie posits an alternative mode of representation that boldly conflates the binary opposition between documentary and abstract art, reimagining photographs of both the traumatic experience of his own cultural lineage as well as the traumatic experience of others into his own vividly expressive, visual language. Xie's work reveals that it is precisely in the slippage between the documentary and artistic that trauma can be mobilized for sociopolitical transformation, thus discovering the potential for cross-cultural empathy and understanding.

In the spirit of his critique of *Shoah* and his warning of an “uncritical, positive” transference of the traumatic experience, Dominick Lacapra promotes an alternative form of engagement with traumatic pasts. He dubs this practice *empathic unsettlement*, explaining “it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, critical engagement is predicated on the spectator’s conscious distance from the traumatic experience, which can in turn be managed and mitigated by the specific mode of representation. In this way, an ideal form of aesthetic interpretation actively encourages a spectator’s sympathies

---

<sup>23</sup>Lacapra, 41.

while simultaneously revealing to them the limitations of this sympathy.<sup>24</sup> The work of Xiaoze Xie performs this essential task, attending to an historical reality through the appropriation of archival photographs, while at the same time gesturing to that which exceeds the frame through his own expressive brushstrokes. In its mobilization of this framework, Xie's artistic practice is also a salient example of photography's affective potential, a potential on which Roland Barthes eloquently elaborates in his work *Camera Lucida*.

In this seminal text, Barthes explores the ontology of the photographic image, coining the terms *studium* and *punctum* to describe the dualities at work within the photograph. While the *studium* constitutes the cultural, historical fabric that undergirds the photograph, facilitating the spectator's casual interest and participation in the world of the image, the *punctum* emerges from the photograph itself, pricking or piercing the spectator to powerfully arouse his or her sympathy.<sup>25</sup> Barthes suggests the danger behind this spontaneous, uncontrollable force, immediately reaching for Freudian language to describe the *punctum*'s psychological undertones. He concludes: "I had just realized that however immediate and incisive it was, the *punctum* could accommodate a certain latency."<sup>26</sup> Barthes' language of "the wound" and his appropriation of the Freudian concept "nachträglichkeit" reveal not only the inherent linguistic fluidity between photography and trauma, but also their conceptual fraternity. While the *studium* suggests a vast, unbridgeable lacuna separating the spectator from the decidedly past event, the *punctum*, I would

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 26-27.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 53.



argue, is analogous to the re-wounding that LaCapra views as inimical to *empathic unsettlement* and a critical understanding of the traumatic experience. Ultimately, the documentary photographs Barthes discusses may either permit us to simply regard the pain of others from a distance as a fixed, closed event, or rewind the spectator in a continual retransmission of the trauma. This analysis, however, leaves no room for a middle ground. It is this paralyzed binary into which Xie's artistic practice intervenes, operating on the boundary between these absolutes to create art that simultaneously defies the rigidity of the trauma as "past," as well as its capacity to rewind, thereby encouraging a viewer's "empathic unsettlement."

In his early mixed media work, *Order (Red Guards)*, Xie crafts a painting derived from an actual photographic image in a photorealist manner on a Chinese hanging scroll, cascading vertically down a wall and pinned against its surface by thirty-three square, bright red pins that parade horizontally across the work (figure one). A product of his ongoing fascination with books, knowledge, and history, Xie's work emerges from the desolate ruins of the Cultural Revolution. At first glance, the viewer is confronted by the striking vertical hanging scroll format, which serves as a support for Xie's photo-painting.<sup>27</sup> The painting depicts a Cultural Revolution-era book burning, exemplifying the violence done to Chinese history and tradition on behalf of Mao's creation of a new China. By using the vertical hanging scroll as his support, Xie evokes the famous tradition of Northern Song monumental landscape painting, thereby abstracting his source photograph into a landscape of destruction and ruin.

---

<sup>27</sup> Term borrowed from Kaja Silverman who uses it to describe the work of Gerhard Richter in, "Photography By Other Means," *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 168-205.

Unlike the perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution who ardently razed artifacts of Chinese history in the hope that a new nation would rise from the ashes, Xie calls upon Chinese aesthetic history to imbue his work with meaning, deliberately breaking the cycle of violence inflicted on Chinese tradition. Xie's work not only embodies a canonical and compelling living Chinese aesthetic tradition, but also simultaneously acknowledges China's traumatic past as a part of his and China's contemporary ontology. By immortalizing the brutality of the book burning incident in his painting and symbolizing China's infamous Red Guard as the infinitely reproducible red pins, Xie recognizes trauma's role in the continual regeneration of Chinese identity. As a result, Xie prevents both the erasure and closure of the traumatic experience; instead, he mobilizes the event as a catalyst for his own creative output, from which new channels for cross-cultural understanding are forged. In this way, the past refuses to simply exist as a fixed "past" against which a present self, Chinese or "other," can be differentiated and defined. Unlike a purely documentary photograph that reveals a fixed reality, Xie's abstract work hints at something beyond a past, set certainty, engaging multiple temporalities to reveal and shape what we are in the course of becoming.

Furthermore, by rendering a documentary photograph into a painting, Xie imbues the once static, immobile lines that structured the photograph's *studium* into an evocative, hazy nebula of ashen remains, blurred slightly as if inevitably disremembered. Once merely a static tombstone of death and loss, the photograph has been powerfully re-inscribed into the world of the living. Still, Xie's abstraction does not point endlessly outward to rework the viewer in a way that would foreclose attaining critical distance from the traumatic experience. Instead, Xie makes visible the small but meaningful gap that distinguishes a photograph from its referent,

foreclosing the harmful potential of the original photograph's *punctum*.<sup>28</sup> This void offers a position from which the viewer can neither simply accept the truth claim offered by the original document nor examine the art object with solely aesthetic criteria. Instead, the viewer is poised precariously between the traumatic event and the aesthetic object, motivating him or her to contemplate the event in critical terms. This destabilizing perspective, relinquishing the sheltering perceptual and interpretive anchors of both documentary practice and abstract art, incites an intellectual engagement with the traumatic experience. However, this engagement is not the unmitigated sympathy or overidentification decried by LaCapra. Alternatively, Xie's work manages a viewer's sympathy by both deliberately revealing the seams of its medium, forsaking claims to an ultimate and knowable truth, and allowing affect to arise in a place, rather than from a human subject or victim. Thus, the work creates the potential for meaningful empathy and understanding in which the viewer can fully empathize with the trauma of another.

As Xie bore witness to the horrific events in Tiananmen Square on June 4th, 1989, Chinese pop artist Zhang Hongtu debuted his *Long Live Chairman Mao Series #29*, morphing the face of the man on the Quaker Oats box into a portrait of Chairman Mao with only a few brushstrokes (figure two). The Western art world quickly became enamored with his work; however, the work failed to communicate the scope, violence, and suffering of this history. This uncanny conflation of the symbol of hearty Americana with the iconic Chinese patriarch is easily translatable, harnessing the already naturalized and globalized language of marketing and advertising to transform the art object itself into a commodity for both Western and Chinese

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 174.

consumption.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Zhang's work both willfully negates the transformative potential of the traumatic experience in a cheeky, gimmicky gesture, and ultimately fails to engage viewers' critical faculties in a meaningful cross-cultural interpretation, as its form as well as its appreciation is predicated upon a pre-existing participation in the global marketplace. In contrast, the work of Xie refuses to cleave to this already established transnational language that would allow for an easy interpretation of foreign cultural output. Instead, his artistic practice actively generates new, affective channels through which global interconnectedness can emerge, allowing for the productive and transformative potential of the traumatic experience.

For example, in his large 2012 canvas, *October 19, 2007 L.M.*, Xie depicts a cropped section from a newspaper, dominated by the headline "130 morts, Pakistan le cortège de l'ex-premier ministre, de retour après huit ans d'exil visé par un kamikaze [130 dead, Pakistan procession of the former Prime Minister, after eight years of exile, hit by suicide bomber]." Below, a photograph of the incident's aftermath is rendered paradoxically in exquisite colors and expressive lines, transforming a once photographically contained fire into a beautifully destructive natural force (figure three). The painted photograph oozes beyond the boundaries that were once rigidly delineated by the highly-structured format of the newspaper's front page, literally dripping off the canvas's surface, down its sides and toward the wall. Two bodies are splayed in the foreground, while the face of the target, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, emerges surrealistically from the flames in the top right corner of the image. By painting this traumatic event as an "outsider," mediated by a language that is neither his mother nor his second tongue, Xie overtly makes visible a set of global, interconnected links that are normally hidden

---

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, 140.

from view. These links are formed not only through the literal dissemination of news, but also through the shared experience of trauma. Perpetually pointing towards death and loss, Xie's work insists that mortality is a fundamental aspect of human existence, linking and binding us to all other living creatures. Xie's artistic practice becomes an active vehicle for the essential, political task of reframing trauma not as attached to a rigidly delineated place or culture, but as a fluid, living space in which inside and outside, center and periphery are constantly in flux.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, Xie's work provides the conditions for this radical decentering of the traumatic experience, but it is the viewer who must ultimately provide the final link in this interconnected global vision, reconstructing the concrete event from Xie's creative abstraction.

Yet another striking aspect of Xie's newspaper paintings is the odd translucency of his work, mimicking the wispy pages of the newspaper that, when held up to light, reveal what is inscribed on the opposite side. In this particular work, a backwards image of a cartoon emerges at the bottom-right edge of the painting, as if rendered on the other side of an impossibly thin canvas. Ironically, the cartoon is of a lone man dressed in a military outfit, donning an ill-fitting, oversized battle helmet and awkwardly carrying a large gun. The unsettling juxtaposition of images of real violence with their comedic counterparts was not a fabrication by the artist – Xie insists that he makes no changes to the content of his source materials. When encountered in a newspaper, these juxtapositions rarely irk or perturb the reader's experience. However,, when re-presented as a painting, the ironic and even insensitive alignment of these two images powerfully crystallizes. In this way, Xie makes visible the potentially disturbing, non-hierarchical culture of images, a culture in which such images are constantly competing both for the limited channels of

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

dissemination, as well as for our even more limited attention spans. When examined collectively, however, Xie's oeuvre does not cleave to a simple condemnation of our image-saturated contemporary landscape. In fact, Xie harnesses his aesthetic as a mobile set of tools, engaging most recently with an even more frenetic, potent realm of image production and circulation – the internet.

In his latest show at Chambers Fine Art Gallery in New York City, Xie exhibited a series of oil works on aluminum panels – each rectangle a painting of an image the artist found through Weibo, the Chinese hybridization of Facebook and Twitter (figure four). As with Xie's newspaper paintings, these works are not expunged of the evidence of their origin. Instead, each work remains permanently branded with its url, as well as the website's logo in the bottom right-hand corner. All seven panels engage with changes surrounding memory and history in the face of these newly established modes of communication. One of the images depicts a large pile of rubble, with broken bricks and other building materials filling the frame almost entirely. In the center of the painting, a soft, red cloth is artfully draped over the ruin. The work seems to defy the viewer's fruitless attempts to contextualize or situate the image in specific spatial or temporal coordinates, embodying the increasing dissociation between signs and their referents as images circulate freely in the virtual world. This detachment is underscored further by the images' presentation in the gallery space. Rather than displayed hanging flush against a wall, the impossibly thin aluminum panels protrude outward into the gallery space, creating a noticeable gap between the image and the wall, as well as heightening the images' flimsy materiality. Through its lack of physicality, Xie emphasizes the limitations of interaction and understanding

that may be generated from virtual communication, asking viewers to consider the precarious status of documentary practice in our contemporary moment.

Despite Xie's powerful artistic statement, to suggest that the artist is merely offering a critique of our technological age would be to elide the specificity of his own politically fraught context. In contemporary China, the internet has emerged as a potentially dangerous platform on which alternative information can rattle the legitimacy of China's all-powerful Communist Party. Through the unsettling juxtapositions within this series, Xie addresses the multifaceted consequences of these volatile conduits, suggesting that these potentially generative channels of promulgating information can simultaneously be maintained and controlled by those in power to quell dissent. This insistence is underscored by the inclusion of invasive Weibo logo on each work – a continual reminder of the Great Firewall and the Chinese government's prohibition of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. In addition, the leftmost work depicts three figures: two men in modern dress standing together on the left, and a third statuesque figure dressed in outdated army attire poised on a tall pedestal on the right. Posed against a plain white backdrop, these figures are separated by seemingly unbridgeable physical and ideological rifts. The young men make the soldier seem anachronistic, as if he truly is a statue of a man from another era. The palpable tension between past and present is embodied not only in this work, but also in the series as a whole, which actively poses questions over the ways of accessing information in present-day China.

Through his continual reappraisal of the once static opposition between documentary and abstraction, Xie's work makes visible the limitations of current theories of trauma to account for the collective violence haunting contemporary China, a violence which has never been fully

demystified through an open, public dialogue. Although the distinction between victim and perpetrator is never entirely clear, Mao-era suffering is largely distinct from the affliction attended to by trauma theory in the extreme haziness surrounding these actors. The recent traumas of Chinese history were not those inflicted on one group by another; instead, they were inflicted within national boundaries, allegedly on behalf of the movement to solidify a common national identity. Upon consideration of the particularities of state-sanctioned violence in twentieth-century China, when the “valid,” “objective” channels for disseminating and obtaining information became corrupted and manipulated by those in power, the question of how can art generate new conduits for understanding the affective, subjective experience of a lingering traumatic legacy becomes essential. As these avenues of knowledge and truth production are continually co-opted and monitored by contemporary power structures, artists are obliged to create alternative methods for cross-cultural empathy and understanding, questioning the extent to which documentary or abstract practice can separately and fully apprehend the traumatic experience. For Xie, as well as for many other contemporary Chinese artists, aesthetic production is not only an expression of an individual subjectivity, but also a deeply social, political, and ethical project.

In his early works, Xiaoze Xie allows the violence of twentieth century China to exist as a permanent ghost within the gap between past and present, harnessing the traumatic experience as his own creative catalyst by conflating documentary and abstract modes of representation. Later, Xie uses his artistic practice to reveal trauma and suffering as a common denominator among all human beings, making visible and generating channels through which the pain of others can be shared and understood. Furthermore, Xie has used his work most recently to



question the fundamental methods of disseminating and understanding images of violence in the virtual world, revealing that art is not simply a window through which we can gain insight into a fundamental human condition, but also a means for actively creating meaning and imagining possible futures. Although markedly disparate artistic endeavors, these aesthetic phases are united in their engagement with documentary source materials and simultaneous abstraction away from the real. In this way, Xie acknowledges that there is a reality of injustice and suffering with which we must contend, but that there are limitations in what we can know and represent. Ultimately, it is Xie's journey and development as an artist that can teach us the most about how to address the traumas of the twentieth century – not as incidents to be forever sealed in the past, but as empathetic events with the potential to make us attentive to the suffering of others and to compel us to reevaluate the binaries that shape our world.

## Chapter Two

### *In the Present*

**Now that we have aligned ourselves** with the gaze of Benjamin's Angel of History through the work of Xiaoze Xie, the time has come to mobilize the Angel's paralyzed form in the present moment, thereby halting the violent, seemingly inescapable storm of progress. This temporal pivot is of critical importance in order to shed light on China's current postsocialist moment, which, beginning in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, has been accompanied by an unprecedented transformation of Chinese society. An era of radical urbanization and modernization, scholars like Daijin Hua have described this social reorganization as the Chinese people's "most chaotic identity crisis in many decades."<sup>31</sup> Although China has witnessed unbridled social, economic, and cultural change in the last decade, the battle over the way in which Chinese history is written and represented remains as fierce as ever.

While a "true" version of history against which all representations can be compared is not accessible to us, there are certainly more ethical modes and approaches of attending to the complicated processes that accompany the influx of global capital. As I show in my comparison of the "Brilliant Civilization" portion of the Olympic Opening Ceremony and the work of Xiaoze Xie, aesthetic practice has the capacity to both obfuscate and adjudicate social injustice. Similarly, in the pages that follow, I will juxtapose the second half of the Opening Ceremony "Glorious Age" against two films from the same year, Ou Ning's documentary *Meishi Street* and Jia Zhangke's docufiction *24 City*. An understanding of the significance of these films, however,

---

<sup>31</sup> Daijin Hua and Judy T.H. Chen, "Imagined Nostalgia," *Boundary 2* 24 vol. 3 (1997), 147.

would be incomplete without an explication of the psychic and aesthetic reversals that marked the beginning of the Chinese 1990s and continue to the present day.

Perhaps the most significant unifying aspect of the varied works discussed in this paper is that whether self-identified as a work of abstract art, a narrative fiction or documentary film, none lays claim to an objective, entirely knowable historical reality. Akin to Benjamin's *Angel of History*, these works do not simply redeem marginalized voices by organizing them into alternative progress narratives. Instead, they aspire to make visible the difficult and inevitably contingent process of excavating truth and creating meaning. In this way, these works both contribute to and reflect the social, cultural, and political milieu of present-day China – a time of crisis in which China's deeply seeded socialist values have come into violent contact with the inexorable forces of global capitalism. Coming of age after the Cultural Revolution, the filmmakers discussed in the following pages grew up shrewdly observing China's critical metamorphosis from an ostensibly egalitarian nation of laborers to a class-stratified, tenuously unified entity, no longer united by the universal tenets of socialism.

However extraordinary China's decade of economic growth and globalization may appear, this perceived stability is poised atop buried histories and increasing social inequity. This ambivalent transformation gave rise to a sociopolitical climate that exceeded and fractured the conceptual totality of socialist modernity that marked the Chinese 1980s. In the "New Era" of the 1980s, a purely modernist framework was harnessed to systematically correct the Cultural Revolution according to idealistic socialist reforms, creating an illusion of post-Mao intellectual freedom which was in fact deeply rooted in the ruthless conditioning of both a universal

socioeconomic fabric, as well as intimate quotidian spaces and rituals.<sup>32</sup> Jing Wang describes this bygone era in her book *High Culture Fever*: “The decade of the 1980s began with the onset of the elite’s introspective look at Mao’s era that kicked off the epochal theme of thought emancipation...a congratulatory self-reflection of their historical role in the program of modernization.”<sup>33</sup>

This moment of modernizing triumphalism, however, barely lasted a decade. A major turning point for Chinese intellectuals, the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre terminated the perceived openness with which thinkers were invited to reexamine the politics of Maoist socialism against global capitalism.<sup>34</sup> In the wake of the incident, a radical disintegration of China’s totalizing, authoritative structures resulted in over a decade of confusion regarding the new moral, social, and political order on which a new China should be founded. In his book *The Cultural Politics of Postsocialism*, scholar Zhang Xudong describes this traumatic rupture in the Chinese consciousness:

If the 1980s gave China a foothold in a world transformed by postwar Capitalist material and cultural production, then the 1990s are more like a moment of truth when China’s self-image and self-recognition — “time-honored” and untested all at once— were put to the test through their bumpy and friction and conflict-ridden encounter with the Other, above all the “universal” symbolic order laid down and embodied by the West led by a triumphant and ideologically aggressive United States. As a result, throughout the 1990s, China’s outward explorations and expansions were coupled with an inward self and self-

---

<sup>32</sup> Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997),

<sup>33</sup> Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Litzinger, “Theorizing Postsocialism,” 37.

reflection. The two movements were intertwined in such a way that an internally differentiated and fragmented notion of the national selfhood, rather than an overarching, cosmopolitan framework of the universal, has become the main source for the collective identity of postsocialist Chinese society.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, the fractured sociopolitical climate of Chinese 1990s was marked not only by the physical loss of bodies in the Tiananmen Massacre, but also by the more nebulous, but equally traumatic loss of inadequate, utopian Socialist ideologies in the new world order. Deliberately purged from official versions of contemporary Chinese history, the Tiananmen Massacre and its implications have not been aired through a public, open dialogue, which would effectively contain the scope of the traumatic experience through legal adjudication. At the same time, the spread of global capital has taken a toll on spatial sites of memory, transforming large swaths of urban China into frenetic, dystopian metropolises. In a rush to embrace transnational culture, communities rooted in collective memory and tradition are fading. The “sanguine vision” of globalization, Ban Wang explains, “is little more than a euphemism to conceal the injustices of the global expansion of capital and the maintenance of the asymmetry of resource and power.”<sup>36</sup>

Considering the amorphous, undefinable traumas inflicted by globalization, ones that can be neither adjudicated through legal means nor closed through the process of mourning, it becomes clear that contemporary China is coping with what amounts to a Lacaprian “structural trauma.” This absence exceeds the concrete, replaceable boundaries of a Freudian lost object,

---

<sup>35</sup> Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ban Wang, “Reenchanting the Everyday in the Global City,” *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 181-182.

thus resisting the closure that accompanies mourning through tandem legal or aesthetic processes. In this way, post-Tiananmen Chinese society is enveloped in a state of persistent melancholia, thereby continually exceeding theories put forth by trauma theory and demanding a new schema for parsing historical rubble. Akin to the frameworks proposed by Eng and Kazanjian's *Loss*, this methodology must animate the static, helpless body of Benjamin's Angel in the present moment without the aid of institutional forces and the progress narratives they buttress. Instead, it is through alternative modes of expression and representation that we can forge a new relationship to the past by engaging with present day social reality through a deeply reflexive cinematic lens. While the films discussed in this paper do not actively probe the remains of historical traumas like the Cultural Revolution, these open wounds have been simultaneously aggravated and concealed by China's rapid globalization, a globalization with psychocultural traumas that are less tangible, but equally pronounced.

It is not a coincidence that the critical moment of socio-historical schism described by scholars gave rise to a new age of Chinese filmmakers often referred to as the "Sixth Generation," marking a radical reshaping of Mainland China's film culture. "As much of the 1990s is in fact an extension of the development and cultural logic of the 1980s," cultural critic Daijin Hua reflects, "this period brings about a reversal in terms of cultural representations."<sup>37</sup> This rupture with the form and content of previous Fifth Generation filmmakers embodies what Daijin Hua cites as the most significant psychosocial shift in the Chinese 1990s: the "replacement of the 1980s collective dream with the 1990s individualist dream of wealth."<sup>38</sup> Disillusioned with

---

<sup>37</sup> Hua and Chen, "Imagined Nostalgia," 156.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

the officially sanctioned mainstream cinema of their predecessors, which deliberately mythologized the founding of the Communist Party and fetishized socialist legacies,<sup>39</sup> these filmmakers originated as a small group of Beijing Film Academy graduates who continue to dominate the Chinese film scene today.

The filmmakers of the Sixth Generation, who have enchanted Mainland Chinese viewers and international film festival audiences alike, are united in both their distance from the 1980s Fifth Generation, as well as by a “singular preoccupation with the destruction and reconstruction of the social fabric and urban identities of post-1989 China.”<sup>40</sup> While never an explicitly unified group, filmmakers who identify with the movement largely define themselves and their work in opposition to the highly stylized works of China’s Fifth Generation. Perhaps best exemplified by well-known director Zhang Yimou, who was ultimately and tellingly tasked with directing the Olympic Opening Ceremony, as discussed above, the Fifth Generation is characterized by its grandiose meditations on human resilience in the face of a fractured Chinese historical narrative.<sup>41</sup> These films, such as Xie Jin’s 1982 film *The Herdsman*, tend neatly to heal traumatic wounds by suggesting that suffering is a natural part of being human and a necessary step on the way to a modern, thriving Chinese state.<sup>42</sup> In the 1990s, however, the glossy, mythic figures

---

<sup>39</sup> Zhang Zhen, *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 110.

<sup>42</sup> Ban Wang, “Traumatic History Against Melodrama: Blue Kite,” *Illuminations from the Past*, 142-162.

created by the Fifth Generation and the famed actors who portrayed them were displaced by depictions of troubled people on the margins of China's urbanization and marketization, often played by nonprofessional actors. The films discussed here exemplify the aims and practices of the Sixth Generation, taking up the problematics of advancing global capital in a society wholly unprepared both psychologically and socially for this rapid transformation.

What we witness in these two films, both of which are imbued with a fiercely independent sensibility, is an implosion of traditional ideals, ethics, mores and relationships as well as the actual physical environment, before the protagonists can comprehend this radical transformation of their quotidian life. Aesthetically, the unifying quality of the films with which I am concerned is their blurring of the conventional boundaries that separate documentary and narrative fiction. For these filmmakers, the documentary method is critical in anchoring the stories to the reality of people in their social milieu, as well as tapping into the wellspring of critical and aesthetic tools advanced by the New Documentary Movement. Still, this aesthetic is grounded in a reality that is always shifting and transforming, demanding the liberating lens of narrative fiction to cast the murky strangeness of the quotidian into relief. In this way, these films seek not to set forth a new ideological framework for making sense of the world, but rather to destabilize mainstream narratives and to make visible their contradictions with the realities of everyday life. Refusing an easily digestible, all-encompassing conception of reality, this aesthetic practice suggests that history, and the rubble that is buried beneath, is never immediately accessible to us even through purely political or aesthetic means. While these films insist on an abandonment of objectivity, they attest to the cinematic medium's capacity to testify on behalf of bodies and spaces that are on the brink of erasure in contemporary Chinese life. Through these



films, we are liberated from the need to excavate the kernels of truth buried in traumatic pasts, instead questioning the authoritative narratives of progress which continue to silence and occlude alternative histories in the present day.

One such authoritative narrative of progress is exemplified by the 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremony, which, in its second half “Glorious Age,” posits China’s economic, social, and cultural rise on the world stage as a natural, effortless step in its historical trajectory. As I demonstrated in the first portion of this paper, the “Brilliant Civilization” half of the Olympic Ceremony neglected to attend to the traumas of twentieth century China, closing with a rapturous reenactment of Chinese art and music before finally cutting away from the narrative staging space to an aerial view of the Birds’ Nest stadium. This shot not only marks the end of the first portion of the ceremony, but also serves as the establishing shot for the staging of China’s “Glorious Age.” The performance opens with an enchanting, dreamy piano chart performed on a gleaming, white grand piano by renowned musician Lang Lang. Lang Lang is accompanied by a five-year-old girl who perches beside him on the piano bench, grinning and tapping the occasional note on the keyboard. The duo sits in the middle of the hand scroll, aesthetically and symbolically positing this part of the ceremony as a seamless continuation of China’s existing historical narrative. As the music plays, a sea of luminescent, green bodies swirls into formation around the performance, coalescing into a dove, an international symbol of peace and harmony, as a montage of digital images of contemporary Chinese life are projected onto the hand scroll. The shimmering green bodies form into a model of the Bird’s Nest stadium, as the temporal arc of the Opening Ceremony’s historical reenactment and the current moment intersect for the first time in

the performance. For the remainder of the ceremony, we are projected into an imagined future, replete with technological innovation, unbridled optimism, and harmonious multiculturalism.

Perhaps the most visible way in which the Chinese Opening Ceremony elides the imminent problems of China's recent (and future) industrialization and urbanization is in its imagining of a peaceful reconciliation of unrestrained capitalism with our increasingly precarious natural environment. Attempting to assuage worldwide concerns over China's rampant pollution, the Opening Ceremony portrays China as having an authentic and continuous connection to the natural world. The theme "Green Olympics" figured prominently throughout the Olympics, embodied by a Tai Chi performance during the Opening Ceremony. Tai Chi masters performed their ancient art form *he* (harmony) to "express the harmony between nature and humans and *feng seng shui qi* (the sound of wind and water rising in tandem)."<sup>43</sup> Next, 2008 Chinese actors collectively executed a complicated series of Tai Chi movements. Their synchronized motions were propelled into the modern age with whimsical visualizations of the five elements; earth, metal, water, air, and fire. The principles of Tai Chi are derived from Daoism, which asserts that all Beings are united by *qi*, the vital breath of life. Countering theories of relationality that are undergirded by entrenched anthropocentrism, Daoism the cyclical inevitability of the world's natural rhythms – cycles which are beyond the manipulation by mankind. Appealing to Western romantic notions of Eastern religions as aligned with nature, this combination of ancient forms with modern technology situates traditional Chinese principles as remaining integral to a contemporary political rhetoric that in fact are entirely at odds with these philosophies.

---

<sup>43</sup> Zhiyan, Borgerson, Shroeder, 95.

In another attempt to mitigate widespread criticism over the environmental consequences of China's urbanization, the Opening Ceremony presents the nation's subsequent generation as a promising solution to these problems. In this sequence, approximately forty smartly dressed children sit in the center of the large, unfurled hand scroll. Outfitted in backpacks and supervised by a female teacher, this "class" represents the thousands of young children in schoolrooms throughout present day China, as they prepare to inherit their nation. The children sketch and color on the hand scroll as they chant in both Chinese and English: "The air is warming, ice caps are melting, land becomes smaller, birds are vanishing. We plant trees, we sow seeds, the earth turns green, the sky is blue indeed. Spring again we see, birds fly back with glee." The rectangle of seated children is surrounded by concentric circles of Tai Chi masters. This juxtaposition of geometric shapes evokes the traditional symbols of a unified heaven and man – one of the highest spiritual aims of Tai Chi.<sup>44</sup> A spectacular feat of discipline and strength, the Tai Chi performance ends as the children's finished landscape painting is lifted into the sky.

As can be seen from this arrangement of ancient Chinese arts with the nascent generation, the Opening Ceremony masterfully asserts environmental conscientiousness as a part of an historically continuous, authentic set of Chinese values. Said another way, the Opening Ceremony assuages international concerns over China's well-documented pollution problems by suggesting that the nation's modernization is not simply the root of this problem, but rather an essential part of its resolution. In this way, the Opening Ceremony exemplifies the potential for aesthetic representation to occlude the dire consequences of China's rapid embrace of global

---

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Galante, *Tai Chi: The Supreme Ultimate* (Boston: Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC, 1981), 29.

capitalism, concealing the fact that this growth is predicated on a type of violence that, while less visible than that perpetrated during the Cultural Revolution, is equally pernicious. Thus, in the absence of open and just legal systems, the burden of adjudicating these wrongs once again is taken up by aesthetic practice. Through a continued engagement with a style of documentary practice that reflexively questions its own realist aspirations, *Meishi Street* and *24 City* both reveal the dark underbelly of China's recent capitalist revolution, thereby animating the Angel of History's immobile form.

**One of the most significant** artistic trends in contemporary Chinese aesthetics, the "New Documentary Movement" has been central to engaging the hidden histories of China's late twentieth century through the present day. This wave of documentary cinema became central to Chinese audio-visual culture in the years after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, beginning with Wu Wenguang's 1990 film *Bumming in Beijing*.<sup>45</sup> Characterized by their spontaneous and unpredictable style, these independent documentaries strive for a *jishi zhuyi* ("on-the-spot") form of realism, evoking the aesthetic of Direct Cinema through the use of low-budget mini DV cameras.<sup>46</sup> Creating a sense of immediacy and urgency, this aesthetic responds to the need to record things as they happen. As a result, rather than directly confront dominant ideologies, these tactics oppose authoritative narratives by relying on the cinematic medium to expose and unmask their foibles and contradictions with everyday life.

---

<sup>45</sup> Chris Berry, Ly Xinyu, Lisa Rofel, *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement* (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

In his essay “DV: Individual Filmmaking,” which has become a sort of manifesto for New Documentary Movement filmmakers, Wu Wenguang articulates the aesthetic possibilities created by the introduction of mini DV cameras to the Chinese film scene in 1997, celebrating his experience as one of personal transformation and even salvation. Wu writes: “I’ve become an individual with a DV camera, filming as I please whatever happens to be in my line of vision, whether or not it has anything to do with a ‘theme.’”<sup>47</sup> In other words for Wu, as well as the filmmakers who follow his lead, the camera has the power not only to record alternative, quotidian events which are expunged from the historical record, but also to grant the individual subjectivity and agency. By taking to the streets with a camera, one does not simply see as the Angel of History, but rather lays claim to the present moment, forging a path toward an unfixed future.

The profound influence of the New Documentary Movement has persisted over two decades following Wu’s seminal 1990 film, challenging the contemporary Chinese state-sponsored film scene and thereby creating an aesthetic platform for alternative stories and voices. The dichotomy between the New Documentary Movement and authoritative representation crystallizes in the divergent aesthetic responses to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The diverse array of aesthetic responses to this crucial event reveals the Olympics’ landmark significance, allowing a variety of channels through which to interpret and understand its place in recent Chinese history. While there may not be a pure or “true” history of these events against which its representations can be measured for accuracy or truth, there are distinct approaches and modes of aestheticization that can be productively compared. Although the abstraction of historical events

---

<sup>47</sup> Wu Wenguang, “DV: Individual Filmmaking” *Cinema Journal* 46 (2006), 139-140.

can have positive implications, and is an essential part of all the aesthetic examples discussed in this paper, fictionalizations which purport to be universal, unequivocal versions of these events foreclose these productive possibilities by occluding history's unsightly but meaningful blemishes.

As previously demonstrated, the event's Opening Ceremony is one such representation, eliding historical losses, as well as the troubling consequences of China's recent urbanization and industrialization. In a radical challenge to this unilateral, mythological vision of Chinese history, Ou Ning's documentary film *Meishi Street* offers a meditation on the ruin and rubble upon which this dominant narrative has been built. In contrast to Zhang's celebratory, mythic depiction of a united, "harmonious" nation, *Meishi Street* hands the camera to a working class restaurant owner, countering the authoritative narrative with a subjective, deeply personal tale of the costs of "urban renewal" in preparation for the Olympics. Departing from objective, totalizing narratives, the film reflexively questions its own representational capacity, meditating on its failures and couching its claims in layers of subjectivity and affect. An iteration of the New Documentary Movement, this film resists supplanting the universal, dominant narrative of those in power with its own equally comprehensive version of the events. Instead, *Meishi Street* acts as an alternative, emotionally ambivalent archive, excavating the remains left behind by China's rapid movement toward a hypercapitalist telos and exploring the limitations of a socially-oriented documentary method.

By troubling conventional, assumed notions of documentary authority, *Meishi Street* addresses and avoids many of the representational problems discussed earlier, which are often viewed as endemic to documentary practice. The film chronicles the destruction by the Chinese

government of a Beijing hutong, a traditional residential alleyway, in an effort to triple the street's width to prepare for the Olympics. Although the film shares many qualities with its New Documentary predecessors, it takes a methodological pivot when Ou Ning hands a camera to the film's protagonist Zhang Jinli, turning the subject of the documentary into a documentarian in his own right. Thus, the film actively destabilizes and complicates assumed notions of directorial authorship, imbuing a once sidelined individual with the tools to chronicle his own history. Still, it is often impossible to tell who is responsible for filming each scene – for even in scenes where Zhang is the main figure, it is difficult to tell if he has set the camera up to observe his own actions or if the filmmakers actually are present. For example, Zhang is portrayed doing paperwork at his kitchen table. The camera is static, suggesting that Zhang himself prepared the shot; however, we do not see him walk away from the camera and sit down after pressing the record button as we do in other, aesthetically similar scenes. This strategic ambiguity undermines the film's status as a simple vehicle for social justice, as it is generally unclear from what ideological perspective we are viewing the events.

Moreover, Ou Ning's reticence in harnessing the documentary as a unilateral counter-narrative to authorial histories is echoed by Zhang Jinli himself, who does not immediately embrace his camera to testify for his victimhood. Rather, his relationship to the camera morphs and evolves throughout the film, exploring the possibilities and limitations of the "social documentary" within an added layer of subjectivity. First, Zhang explores the technological possibilities of the camera, filming his own goofy performances in front of the lens and the quotidian rituals of his friends and family. Throughout the first twenty minutes of the film, Zhang slowly seems to realize the camera's potential to serve not only as evidence of his suppression,

but also as a vehicle for enacting real change, becoming a sort of cinema activist. For example, while filming a neighbor's partially torn-down home, Zhang asks "Can you still tell this is Liu Guosen's home at Meishi Street No. 76?"<sup>48</sup> Zhang actively interpellates his film's future audience – one that can make empathic judgements about Zhang and his neighbor's suffering. Here, Zhang's efforts become part of a greater mission and purpose, transforming the camera from a technological toy into a tool for sociopolitical intervention. Zhang's reflection on the camera's potential reaches its apotheosis in a verbal confrontation with a government official. While filming the official, Zhang says "I'm really not over this property dispute." Pointing his finger at Zhang and the camera, the official replies "tomorrow I'll bring my own video camera along, we can film each other." Zhang responds by half-heartedly downplaying his camera's significance; however, the official remains wary of its presence, acknowledging Zhang's camera as a potentially dangerous alternative to official modes of representation. In these two scenes, Zhang's relationship to his own role as a documentarian is a hopeful one, suggesting that his own documentary practice has the potential to derail authoritative narratives predicated on his very erasure.

However, as the film progresses, Zhang's faith in the potential to forge an alternative, more just and equitable future through documentary practice begins to wane. Zhang's realization of his own limited agency is epitomized by his shift from social documentarian to archivist and collector. Fueled by his anxiety over the quickly disappearing present, Zhang begins using his camera to capture images of his neighborhood, as if in an attempt to freeze his world at the moment before its imminent destruction. In one particularly poignant, highly reflexive moment,

---

<sup>48</sup> Emphasis added.



Zhang films the outside wall of his dilapidated home, commenting that the government will not officially recognize it as his property. Zhang nostalgically reflects: “But no words can change these physical remnants of history.” Already describing his home in terms of ruin and rubble, Zhang has come to terms with the future’s immutability, catalyzing his loss of faith in the documentary’s potential to create alternative futures. As a result, Zhang utilizes his camera to cull images of his suddenly precarious world, harnessing the documentary method to collect these visual artifacts of his endangered way of life. Thus, in the face of his inevitable eradication from the pages of history, Zhang uses his camera to create a personal archive in opposition to authoritative records, evoking the project of Walter Benjamin’s “collector.”

In his essay “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting,” Walter Benjamin reminisces fondly over his assortment of volumes, discussing the purpose and power of collecting objects. Akin to Zhang, Benjamin’s collector creates a personal, deeply subjective alternative to the official, public archive – one not rigidly organized or catalogued, but rather one to serve as a partial lens through which to access intimate memories. Benjamin espouses the subjective value of the collection as a source of meaning, writing “the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Although the public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects only get their due in the latter.”<sup>49</sup> In something of this spirit, Zhang uses his camera to collect the precarious, treasured remains of his unstable world in opposition to the public archive from which he is continually excluded. Zhang walks with the camera through the alleyways of his

---

<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 67.

hutong, pausing at each intersection to recite the street names for the camera. He vacantly repeats: “this is shijia hutong...this is langfang toutiao.” In this way, Zhang collects the audio-visual evidence of his neighborhood –a focal point of his own memories, origins, and roots. Resigned to the impotence of his documentary activism, Zhang turns the archival potential of documentary in the hope of preserving his own marginalized narrative.

In the film’s final scenes, Zhang’s disillusionment with documentary practice reaches its zenith. Zhang and his neighbors gather outside on Meishi Street, watching as a team of officials directs bulldozers to tear down his restaurant and home. Indifferent machines methodically raze the building, ripping his livelihood out by the roots. Zhang has become an itinerant urban dweller – one man among 1.3 billion Chinese bodies. More than a utilitarian structure, Zhang’s restaurant was an essential locus for community gatherings and a wellspring of personal narratives. Its destruction by city officials is more than just a practical gesture in anticipation of the Olympics – the act symbolizes the overarching, unyielding narrative of national becoming and sacrifice on behalf of a collective vision of economic progress. During the demolition, Zhang is overwhelmed with emotion, tears streaming down his face as he witnesses his own excision from the historical record. In spite of his attempt to thwart its inevitability with his filmmaking and activism, the future he feared during the course of the film has now been realized. In a telling gesture, Zhang leaves his lens cap on during the demolition; instead, we watch the events unfold through another filmmaker’s camera. Ultimately, Zhang’s has abandoned filmmaking, accepting the medium’s limitations in countering the incessant march of history.

Even though Zhang’s own filmmaking efforts failed to thwart the “progress” of global capitalism, *Meishi Street* remains as a testament to the power of the documentary method.

Zhang's journey as a documentarian is a powerful core of the film's larger meditation on the necessity of aesthetic engagement with violence and suffering. After the passing of a century cluttered with remains, the question of how to mobilize the rubble created by dominant, authoritative narratives has become a vital question in contemporary Chinese life. The film's final sequence before the destruction of Zhang's restaurant responds to this concern, as the film's directors usurp Zhang's former position as documentarian. No longer occupying the sympathetic position of the victim, the viewer sees the events through a seemingly neutral, documentary-style lens, witnessing a group of government officials storm into Zhang's home while he sleeps. From a stable, distanced position, the viewer watches the government agents force Zhang to evacuate the premises before the demolition begins, a flagrant violation of Zhang's private space.

In the midst of the chaos, a uniformed woman walks into Zhang's home, unexpectedly grasping a camera and recording the scene as if to provide evidence of a job well done. Without dropping her camera, she walks slowly toward the opposing lens, studying the filmmaker curiously in her own camera's screen. The cameras' gazes, and by extension, that of the woman and the viewer, meet for a brief moment, forcefully interpellating the viewer into the scene. Suddenly, the viewer's safe, critical distance from the events collapses, forcing a subjective identification with the events as they unfold. This encounter is not an aggressive confrontation between official and alternative channels of representation; instead, it is a hopeful, humanizing moment that productively destabilizes the sheltering, rigid ethical binaries of victim and perpetrator. Breaking the fourth wall, albeit aided through several lenses, the viewer must acknowledge that the woman is not simply an agent of the regime's oppression. Rather, we must grapple with the human being behind the uniform and the lens. This crucial scene does not

position the camera as a weapon or agent of a hegemonic truth, but as a potential point of convergence for interpersonal empathy and subjective interaction. In this way, *Meishi Street* encourages viewers to engage critically with historical remains and to see themselves as implicated in the lives of victims and perpetrators alike.

In the film's final moments, frequent cutting juxtaposes Zhang's poignant reactions with shots of his crumbling home and restaurant. Additional close-ups depict rubble raining down in front of protest banners and posters adorned with Mao's portrait, symbolizing the dissolution of Socialist values in the contemporary Chinese regime. Meanwhile, the audio continuity is maintained, transcending visual and spatial divides in a relentless soundtrack of wreckage and destruction. The final shot gives an intimate view of Zhang's face as he clutches his capped camera under his chin. The first time Zhang's camera is shown on-screen, it suddenly seems small and fragile, forcing us to question Zhang's, and therefore our own, former belief in its power to dismantle authoritative histories. We ask ourselves an essential question: how could this tiny device ever have prevented this moment from being realized? Ou Ning's camera subtly pans to the right, slowly excluding Zhang's hands and his camera from view. Then the film cuts to black, denying the viewer visual access to the final razing. Still, the soundtrack pervades, viscerally cutting into the viewer's space to engender his or her empathy. Whereas images may contain the event, restricting the trauma to specific spatial and temporal coordinates, sound exceeds these boundaries, forcing the viewer to conjure a multiplicity of potentially suitable images. As a result, Zhang's experience cannot be contained within or limited by a closed, fixed narrative. Rather than appease the viewer's desire to identify the violence with a single, concrete

body or experience, *Meishi Street* urges the viewer to confront the black unknowability of the countless other bodies, spaces, and ideals that have been edited out of dominant histories.

Unlike Zhang Yimou's 2008 opening ceremony, *Meishi Street* provides a subjective, partial view of a buried personal narrative. Ultimately, the film does not attempt to make whole Zhang's shattered life. Instead, the film's act of redemption is located in its attempt to mobilize the remains of Zhang's livelihood in a fruitful way, encouraging a viewer's intellectual, empathic engagement with the events. We are forced to see Zhang's victimization not as exclusive to a closed, single narrative, but as a reminder of the marginalized outcome of limiting, teleological histories of progress. In this way, the film acknowledges not only that there are real histories with which we must contend, but also that there are limits in what we can know and represent. The principal differences between *Meishi Street* and Zhang's opening ceremony reveal that appropriate responses to human suffering and a productive mobilization of these remains is not contingent on a specific media, genre, or method of approach. Instead, they are predicated on a process that makes visible the work's own limitations in creating complete, fully knowable narratives. While *Meishi Street* may forsake claims to an objective truth, it maintains a powerful connection to a deeply subjective, affective reality, revealing the shady underside of dominant ideologies.

**The Sixth Generation** of Chinese Filmmakers came of age after the 1978 post-Mao reforms finally gained a foothold in the nation's urban centers. In post-1989 China, the dramatic changes resulting from China's unprecedented urbanization and globalization escalated, exerting a visual and psychological impact through the literal de/reconstruction of urban spaces, as well

as in the exuberant growth of consumer and popular culture.<sup>50</sup> This new China would have been completely unrecognizable to the filmmakers of the Fifth Generation, whose rigidly constructed, glossy canvases, immortalized by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou's work, celebrate the resilience of Socialist ideals and the triumph of the Chinese will in the face of history. In contrast, the Sixth Generation is well-encapsulated by the films of decorated director Jia Zhangke, whose work offers a raw, penetrating view into Chinese urban life in the postsocialist era. Zhang's cinematic language eschews his predecessors proclivity for melodrama and romance in favor of gritty, realistic aesthetic that highlights the plight of the everyman.<sup>51</sup> While Jia cites his viewing of Chen Kaige's 1984 film, and emblem of the Fifth Generation, *Yellow Earth* as a defining moment in his development as a filmmaker, the filmmaker has been openly critical of directors like Zhang Yimou. As Michael Berry notes, "This tension transformed into antagonism in 2006 when Jia decided to release his award-winning art film *Still Life* (2006) the same day as Zhang Yimou's pan-Chinese martial arts extravaganza *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006)."

Wholly preoccupied with the waves of China's social and cultural change of the past several decades, Jia is interested in the human effects of this transformation, revealing the dark underbelly of encroaching capitalist interests. Jia has expressed this aim:

The Cultural Revolution generation always talks about how they lived through such a painful calamity in Chinese history, but I feel that the shock and incredible impact the decade of reform and economic commodification in the 1980s had on individuals was also extremely profound...you can't say that simply because that generation's material

---

<sup>50</sup> Zhang, *The Urban Generation*, 1-3.

<sup>51</sup> Jason McGrath, "The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke," in *The Urban Generation*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 83-85.

life is richer, their lives are happier. What I really want to focus on is, over the course of this transformation, who is paying the price? What kinds of people are paying the price?<sup>52</sup>

Here, Jia gives the traumas of the Cultural Revolution-era and his own experience of China's economic transformation equal weight as historical ruptures. Although the violence perpetuated in the name of global economic progress may be less visible, it is, as Jia asserts in his films, equally as harmful. Still, rather than confront these dominant ideologies and authoritative historical narratives by offering his own, equally totalizing worldview, Jia dismantles overarching frameworks of social and economic progress by revealing their inherent flaws and contradictions with everyday reality.<sup>4</sup> For Jia, aesthetics are often guilty of obfuscating these disjunctures, perpetuating the rhetoric of a violent, authoritative worldview that is at odds with the functioning of the quotidian.

One of Jia's primary methods for interrogating the ethics of representation is his continual transgression of documentary and narrative fiction genres – a tactic that has been both noted by critics and acknowledged by Jia himself. While certainly *Meishi Street* also complicates strategies of representing loss, namely by creating two, nesting documentaries that at once compliment and contradict one another, *24 City* perhaps goes even further in interrogating the documentary method through its integration of purely fictional material. Still, through these divergent strategies, both films are united in challenging the extent to which either documentary or narrative fiction practice can separately and fully attend to histories of loss. In an interview in 2008, Jia commented: “A lot of people say that my narrative films are like documentaries and my

---

<sup>52</sup> Jia Zhangke in an interview with Jared Rapfogel, “Still Lives in Times of Change: An Interview with Jia Zhangke,” *Cineaste* Vol. 33 (2008), 46.

documentaries are like narrative films, but I feel that both genres have many possibilities for seeking truth.”<sup>5</sup> By insisting on pursuing truth through a wide variety of channels, Jia subjects ordinary genre distinctions, as well as the aesthetic representation itself to a critical gaze. As opposed to the Fifth Generation’s ideologically totalizing films, Jia’s cinematic vision reveals its inevitable partiality, echoing *Meishi Street*’s call for a certain type of aesthetic engagement with loss – ones that make visible the horizons and limitations of representation itself.

An overt hybridization of documentary and fiction cinematic modes, or a “docufiction,” Jia’s 2008 film *24 City* chronicles the demolition of a state-owned Chengdu factory to make room for a modern apartment complex. It is the loss of this spatial site of memory that catalyzes the film’s aim to catalog the factory’s long history – one that is deeply intertwined with China’s twentieth century narrative. Throughout the film, Jia enlists both actors and real workers to testify in front of the camera regarding their experiences in and around the factory. Spanning several generational perspectives, the film reveals the passion and pride the workers once found in their contribution to a nation which has now cast them aside for the tawdry glamor of globalized consumption and bourgeois tastes. After the film’s release at the Cannes Film Festival, critics like The Guardian’s Peter Bradshaw grew concerned over Jia’s “controversial use of actors playing fictional role, inserted silently amidst real people.”<sup>53</sup> Rather than overtly signpost the insertion of actors, Jia seamlessly interweaves fictional interviews with real ones.

As some critics have noted, this use of artistic license risks diminishing the suffering and loss experienced by the non-actors, as well as by the hundreds of silenced laborers they

---

<sup>53</sup> Peter Bradshaw, “24 City Review” *The Guardian*, 2010.



represent.<sup>54</sup> By sparking this divisive response, Jia clearly challenges traditionally “acceptable” ways of representing loss. Jia’s film begs the question: How through this undisclosed elision of documentary and fiction can a filmmaker ethically attend to the realities of trauma? Using the performative as a point of entry, I will argue that Jia puts this question to rest by revealing the friction between what is real and what is performed, exposing the performative nature of representation, as well as the centrality of performance to the rhetoric of national becoming. Ultimately, Jia’s elision of narrative fiction and documentary practice deepens the impact of the factory’s loss, reminding the viewer that the spatial and cultural losses of contemporary Chinese life are not simply a performance. In this way, Jia vindicates the necessity for both fictional and documentary forms of aesthetic engagement in order to fully comprehend the scope of loss, grounding the narrative in a particular social milieu through documentary practice, while simultaneously interrogating the limits of representation through fiction.

In a welcome intervention into documentary scholarship, Stella Bruzzi discusses the “performative documentary” in her book *New Documentary*, arguing that this mode challenges the traditional understanding of documentary as always striving to faithfully represent reality. For Bruzzi, measuring a documentary’s success by its ability to depict the world is predicated on the “realist assumption that the production process must be disguised.”<sup>55</sup> Performative documentaries typically fail this criteria, heralding a different notion of documentary “truth” that

---

<sup>54</sup> Manhola Dargis, “A Worker’s Past is Wiped Away in Jia Zhangke’s Film,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Stella Bruzzi, “The Performative Documentary” in *New Documentary* (Routledge: New York, 2000), 186.

acknowledges and accepts the artificiality of the non-fiction film. Bruzzi articulates the role of performance in non-fiction films:

The performative documentary uses performance within a non-fiction contest to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation. The performative element within the framework of non-fiction is thereby an alienating, distancing device, not one which actively promotes identification and a straightforward response to a film's content.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, a film's performative elements can effectively reveal the seams of the cinematic medium, preventing a viewer's uncritical, over-identification with the onscreen events. In this way, the film makes visible the cinematic medium's own limitations in providing a window onto the world. While many scholars, such as Bill Nichols, tend to view performative elements negatively, suggesting that they undermine the documentary pursuit of the real, Bruzzi harnesses J.L. Austin's theory of the "performative utterance" to argue that the performative is instead a positive, natural extension of the documentary tradition. Bruzzi's framework illuminates that Jia Zhangke's docufiction film *24 City* cannot be dismissed as an unethical denigration of real suffering. Rather, the film figures documentary as an inherently performative negotiation between the filmmaker and reality. Therefore, making visible this interaction can be viewed as a more "honest" portrayal of daily life and the reality of loss, expanding entrenched definitions of realist film practice. Ultimately, Zhang's foregrounding of the performative aspect of the documentary method allows him to interrogate the nation as a construct, calling attention to its performative aspects through critical, performative aesthetic tools.

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 185-186.

In her essay, Bruzzi distinguishes between two types of performative documentaries: films which are inherently performative and foreground the invasive presence of the filmmaker, and those that feature performative subjects.<sup>57</sup> Whereas most of the examples mentioned by Bruzzi fall squarely within one of these types, I contend that Jia Zhangke's film straddles both categories. First, Jia dissects documentary genre conventions by prioritizing moments of interaction between filmmakers, camera, and subjects, suggesting that the tools of documentary filmmaking are inevitable intrusions that will alter any situation they encounter. The film opens with a highly stylized, cinematic introductory sequence, juxtaposing static, hyperreal shots of the factory's aging machinery and laborers with a sweeping, orchestral score. After this sequence, the filmmaker conducts his first interview with He Xikun. A slight, yet spry man in his sixties, He recalls his experience as a factory worker during the Cultural Revolution, telling a story from his time as a laborer under his resourceful Master Wang who encourages his student to repurpose his tools rather than to throw them away. Although it is an autobiographical account, He's tale verges closer to an apocryphal coming-of-age fable, learning the lesson "waste not, want not" in times of scarcity. After He finishes his story, the filmmaker's voice intrudes from outside the frame, saying "He [Master Wang] knew how many hands our tools had passed through." Through this active engagement with He's testimony, Jia makes visible the documentarian's indelible mark on their films and thus the documentary's inability to capture a pure, authentic reality.

Unlike the "observational" documentary, which according to Bill Nichols "hinges on the ability of the filmmaker to be unobtrusive," thereby masking the filmmaker's

---

<sup>57</sup> Bruzzi, 187.

interventions, Jia is more honest and critical of his filmmaking practice.<sup>58</sup> Jia often highlights his own complicated position in relationship to his film, as he is not only an observer of China's rapid transformation, but also both a participant in this history. This notion crystallizes in this particular intervention into He Xikun's testimony. Jia uses the phrase "our tools," thereby aligning himself with He and the bygone generation he symbolizes. By interrogating his own relationship to and implication in China's tumultuous narrative, Jia undermines the objective, truth-seeking aims that documentarians are perceived to embody. Still, this performative moment is not simply an exceptional rupture in this documentary's otherwise consistent claim to represent reality. Rather, it reveals a deeper, perhaps more meaningful truth about Jia's own personal, ethical motivations in using his medium to enshrine a spatial site of memory that is on the brink of erasure.

In addition to illuminating the inherently performative nature of the documentary method, Jia Zhangke's film is at the same time *about* performance. Throughout *24 City*, performative subjects are featured in the film's fictional testimonies. Given by actors who are silently inserted within the film, these interviews draw attention to the performative nature of reality itself. In contrast to the Beijing Opening Ceremony, which elides the violence that accompanies China's urbanization, this performative interrogation deepens the reality of this pain and loss. This aim is manifest in the film's sixth interview with well-known actor Chen Jianbin, who starred in the hugely popular Chinese television series *Three Kingdoms*. In *24 City*, Chen portrays Song Weidong, an assistant to the general manager of the Chengfa group – the company who is responsible for the imminent demolition of Factory 420. Born in 1966, the year the Cultural

---

<sup>58</sup> Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 38-39.

Revolution began, Song's childhood was spent within the small, isolated world of the factory, attending the schools reserved for worker's children, enjoying the pool and cinema facilities, and drinking beverages created by and sold exclusively in the factory grounds. Song reminisces about his youth, describing the factory as a "world apart" from the rest of Chengdu City. Embodying one of the contradictory dichotomies on which contemporary Chinese life is precariously poised, Song has become an instrument of globalization, having been transformed into an agent of the destruction of what remains of his own childhood. Akin to Song, who negotiates the intersection between a fading local milieu and seemingly inexorable global forces, Jia similarly straddles the divide between domestic and transnational in his own cinematic practice. As argued by Jason McGrath in his essay on Jia's independent films, the filmmaker employs both cinematic strategies from 1990s Chinese independent, "underground" film, as well as the aesthetic and commercial channels of a global art market.<sup>59</sup>

During his interview, Song relates an anecdote from his childhood about accidentally riding his bike into a foreign sector of the city, leaving the "zone of influence of Factory 420." He describes a gang of boys who confront him and take him before their leader, Zhou Chao. Song compares the experience to a movie, as his aggressor declares "on behalf of the masses, I sentence you to death." Song's comparison of his experience to a film, coupled with his antagonists' theatrical rhetoric, reveals the centrality of representation in providing the symbolic order for daily life. . Moreover, later in his interview Song relates a romantic story from his youth. Describing his ex-girlfriend, Song says: "There is one thing I remember very clearly, there was a Japanese TV show called 'Red Suspicion' with Yamaguchi Momoe in the role of Sachiko.

---

<sup>59</sup> Jason McGrath, "The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke," 81-82.

I remember her hairstyle. My girlfriend had Sachiko hair.” Song’s continual need to reach for already established aesthetic language in order to describe his past reveals the extent to which representation is deeply implicated in our construction of lived memories, as well as our actions in the present day. Song’s inability to distinguish his own past from representation mimics Jia’s desire to blur the distinction between real and fictional testimonies. However, unlike Song who cannot seem to parse his memory from representation, Jia thwarts a complete elision of these categories by choosing some of China’s most famed, recognizable actors to portray these roles. In this way, Jia avoids captivating the audience with the magic of performance; instead, he reveals its tricks and illusions, reaffirming Bruzzi’s view of the performative mode as an positive, ethical cinematic method. Through these fictional interviews, Jia reveals the mutual implication between documentary and fiction; neither genre can be fully understood without the other.

Furthermore, *24 City* overtly explores the interconnectedness of performance and identity in a central sequence with famed actress Joan Chen. A celebrated symbol of Chinese cinema, Chen has appeared in internationally acclaimed films such as *The Last Emperor* (1987), as well as the American television series *Twin Peaks* (1992), making her a highly recognizable figure to both Chinese and global audiences. As a result, Chen’s renown prevents the viewer’s from uncritically accepting the performance as a pure form of documentary or testimony. In the film, Chen plays factory darling Gu Minhua. A transplant from Shanghai, Gu is featured prominently in the film’s middle segment, figuring in conventionally cinematic scenes, framed by the aesthetic tropes of a typical narrative fiction films, as well as in a long, documentary-style interview with the filmmaker. After a silent establishing shot of the front of Factory 420, the film

cuts to a room filled with elderly women singing a lyrical myth about a beautiful woman who is “graceful like a flower gazing at itself in the wave.” The women sit along the room’s periphery, as the camera slowly tracks and pans, following the ring of chanting women and finally settling on Joan Chen at the end of the row. Donning a pink sweater accented with jeweled details, Chen cannot blend into the crowd as simply another factory worker: concealing her glamor and onscreen appeal is impossible. After the song ends and the women disband, Gu continues a casual conversation with a friend, simultaneously fixing her makeup in a handheld mirror. In the following shot, Chen is seamlessly inserted in the female factory worker’s performance of a traditional Chinese opera. A single medium shot accommodates two disparate activities: on the left side, the performance unfolds in a rundown stairwell; while on the right, retirees chat and play mahjong in an adjacent room. In this scene, rather than operate in the performative mode, *24 City* becomes a film about performance, throwing into relief the role of performance in everyday life. By foregrounding the motifs of performance, including costumes, makeup, mirrors, and singing, the film reveals the parallels between participating in quotidian rituals and acting in a film – both are performative acts. However, rather than cast this notion as an artificial, impenetrable surface that prevents us from accessing reality, the film underscores the pleasures of performance for entertainment and escape, situating the performative as a natural extension of everyday life.

After this striking cinematic sequence, the film returns to a documentary-style aesthetic in an interview with Joan Chen as factory worker Gu Minhua. Sitting in a rundown salon with her back to a mirror, Gu addresses the off-screen filmmaker, relating her personal story of coming to work at Factory 420. In a nod to Joan Chen’s breakout role in the 1979 film *Little*

*Flower*, Gu Minhua has allegedly acquired the nickname Xiao Hua (“Little Flower”) since arriving in Chengdu. Gu Minhua explains:

Some guy, I never knew who, gave me the nickname ‘Standard Component’. At first, I had no idea what it meant. Later I came to know it meant ‘Flower of the Factory.’ After that, people began calling me ‘Little Flower.’ There was a movie called Little Flower, with Joan Chen, Tang Guoqiang, and Liu Xiaoqing. Our factory showed that movie for a whole week. Many people saw it several times. They came out saying I looked like Little Flower, the heroine, played by Joan Chen. At first they used the name behind my back. Then, to my face. After a while, my real name was known to very few people.

Initially, the identity of Joan Chen and those of her two fictional roles, Gu Minhua and Xiao Hua, all seem to flatten into a single plane, as though Chen herself were no more real than her fictional roles. However, the film ultimately argues against this collapse, preventing a complete elision of reality and fiction. As a result of Chen’s fame, she cannot fully close the gap between her real identity and that of Gu Minhua. Throughout the performance, the viewer remains keenly aware of Joan Chen’s presence on the screen, as well as her reflexive, almost winking references to her past roles. Thus, according to the metrics of an ordinary fiction film, this is a failed performance. Chen’s portrayal is an unconvincing one, failing to sustain its illusion as documentary or real testimony. Although it is a failed performance, this scene is successful in inciting a critical engagement with the implications of a performative moment that would typically be hidden from view.

Some documentaries, such as Banksy’s mockumentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, use fictional elements in order to intentionally mislead audiences into the perception of the fiction as a document. While these films punchlines stem from the witty, seamless interchangeability



between reality and fiction, *24 City* deliberately thwarts this easy substitution, revealing the persistence of a reality underneath these layers of performance. As if responding to Baudrillard's radical assertion that there is an increasing "lack of differentiation between image and reality," and that a postmodern reality is one constituted by and for "simulacra," Jia advocates for the continued separation between reality and representation.<sup>60</sup> The reality of suffering and loss is not simply a performance, he seems to say, and while this reality is always contingent and shifting, perhaps failing to deliver any more truth or authenticity than its fictional counterparts, it is nevertheless something we must continually seek. Regardless of whether these testimonies are truly autobiographical, *Factory 420* is ultimately destroyed at the end of the film. Unlike Ou Ning, who shields the viewer from the razing of his protagonist's restaurant and home, Jia forces the viewer to both visually and aurally confront the demolition scene. The destruction is carried out as the camera remains completely static; it is as if the viewer is watching this loss happen in real time. Although Jia acknowledges that aesthetics are often guilty of veiling reality, particularly when mobilized by authoritative institutions, his own films illuminate the medium's capacity to make visible that which is ordinarily concealed performance. In this way, *24 City* vouches for the continued significance of the documentary method, acknowledging its limited access to this reality, while simultaneously testifying for its continued power to grapple with pain and loss.

Finally, *24 City* calls attention to the inherent performativity of national identity and dominant historical narratives in several highly reflexive scenes. By undermining the supposed

---

<sup>60</sup> Jean, Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: Power Institute Publications, 1988), 27-28.

naturalness of authoritative rhetoric, Jia reveals its inherent ironies and flaws, thereby subverting its justification and redemption of loss through grand narratives of progress. For example, in the film's opening sequence, throngs of workers are shown surging through the factory. The film cuts to an auditorium full of laborers, identically uniformed in plain, navy blue work clothes. All signifiers of distinct, individual identities have been erased, as the workers coalesce into a swathe of interchangeable faces and bodies. The camera gazes out from behind a conductor, who leads the sea of workers in an uplifting song, celebrating the "motherland as she grows prosperous and strong." The shot reverses, and the camera is at the back of the auditorium, showing the entire chorus of workers and revealing a panel of businessmen on the auditorium stage. A large red banner reads "ceremony for the transfer of land from Chengfa Group to CR Land LTD." A neatly dressed businessman takes the podium, addressing the crowd with a hopeful, rousing speech. The scene's dramatic lighting simultaneously illuminates the speaker and shrouds the audience from view, visually emphasizing the immense gap in power between the anonymous workers and the unstoppable agents of global capitalism. The businessman's speech embodies authoritative rhetoric, transfiguring the destruction of the old factory into an inspiring tale of resilience and optimism in the face of historical challenges: "Today, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007, will mark a new and glorious chapter in the development of the Chengfa group. For nearly 50 years we have faced difficulties and challenging breakthroughs of economic reform. Now a revitalized Chengfa Group is about to move from the site of the old factory..."

During his speech, medium shots of the workers' blank, expressionless faces underscore the ironic irrelevance of his bombastic, empty rhetoric to the daily lives of the factory laborers.

They are tired of performing, their disinterested faces seem to say, as energy that was once

devoted to a genuine performance of national becoming during China's tumultuous revolutionary years are now gone. Once proud of their labor and contribution to the national Socialist project, the workers have now been cast aside by a new venture – one propelled not by a romantic, egalitarian ideology, but motivated simply by the accumulation of capital. This notion is reinforced in one of the films' final scenes, which features the demolition of Factory 420. Unlike the destruction scene in Meishi Street, this razing is devoid of any visible emotion. No tears are shed on screen, and the camera is the only witness. The sounds of hammering and crumbling concrete are replaced by a patriotic song. Workers are shown singing in unison: "Arise! Ye prisoners of starvation. Arise! Ye toilers of the earth. For reason thunders new creation, 'tis a better world in birth." The international Communist anthem "The Internationale," juxtaposed with the unapologetic, prosaic destruction of Factory 420 makes visible the failure of performance in contemporary Chinese life – a time in which a discredited, authoritative worldview can no longer inspire a believable performance from everyday workers. These critical moments reveal the gap between dominant ideologies and the quotidian, relying on an engagement with the documentary method to ground the setting in a real social milieu. Although the film cannot give the viewer access to the stories or testimonies of all these individuals; the film delivers a deeper, more significant truth about an entire strata of Chinese society who has experienced this concrete and symbolic loss.

Ultimately, *24 City* serves as a new kind of archival film, memorializing Factory 420 through both fictional and real accounts of its impact on several generations of Chengdu residents. By foregrounding the interaction between the filmmaker and his subjects, Jia makes visible edges of the documentary frame – one which has the power to highlight and exclude,

reveal and deceive. At the same time, *24 City* features failed moments of performance in scenes both with actors and real factory workers, making visible the gap between reality and representation, and nation and individual that can never be fully elided. In this way, Jia Zhangke vindicates the need for a dual approach to representing histories of loss – one which both attends to reality through the documentary method and reveals its limitations through an engagement with narrative fiction. Thus, the performative mode cannot be dismissed as a negative, irreconcilable opposition to observational methods of documentary filmmaking. Rather, it is, as Bruzzi argues, an honest and ethical approach to representing reality and attending to loss, aptly suited to Jia Zhangke's cinematic framework. Although *Meishi Street* and *24 City* harness divergent strategies to represent loss, both films reveal that the documentary method, when blended with abstract or narrative fiction practices, remains crucial to engaging these hidden histories. In both their content and their form, *Meishi Street* and *24 City* interrogate the realistic aesthetic and the narrative of progress with which they are intimately related, thereby mobilizing the Angel of History's paralyzed body to unseat harmful teleological histories.

## Afterward

### *Toward Unknown Futures*

**After all the spatial sites** of our memories, traditions, and ideals have been destroyed on the route to global economic progress, where can we journey to remember, to forget, and to become? In a profound reflection on these salient questions, contemporary Chinese artist Cao Fei embraces Second Life as a medium for a recent ensemble of artistic pursuits, challenging the realist assumptions that undergird documentary scholarship through her use of a fully animated, virtual medium. An infamous platform for online play, Second Life is a virtual world in which players fashion avatars that can interact with one another and participate in a specific economy of ideas, goods, and services without a teleological objective. Using the screen capture function that is built into the Second Life interface, Cao Fei stitches together her experience traversing cyberspace in her 2007 documentary *i.Mirror*. Cao Fei powerfully merges the horizons of the virtual and the real, reorienting the Angel of History's gaze toward one of our possible futures.

In a telling and meaningful gesture, Cao Fei attributes her film to her avatar, China Tracy – the impossible hybridization of an idealized, Asian face with a futuristic, yet highly feminized cyborg body. While this clever act of authorial bait and switch may initially recall that of Ou Ning's film *Meishi Street*, its effects are entirely different. While in *Meishi Street* this act undermines the authorial presence of the director, here this gesture verges on a purely postmodern act of lightness and play. China Tracy reminds us that although we seek depth and excoriate shallowness, we are all too often afraid of living deeply. After bearing witness to a time when the language of progress is incised by the bulldozer and buttressed by scaffolding, we are perhaps reluctant to place down roots, preferring to elide and shield our identities with animated

simulations. In an era when images of ourselves circulate faster and more widely than ever before, creating an avatar may initially appear to be an empowering act of self-fashioning, liberating us from the consequences of being fully present or the ethical stakes of parsing our suffering. We venture expectantly into cyberspace, weightless and untethered to a reality that is a relentless reminder of our own limitations. We are more free. And where we are more free, we are more real. Or so it may seem.

Throughout the three-part documentary, *China Tracy* guides the viewer across Second Life's pixelated terrain, fluidly traversing disparate spaces as a virtual flaneur. A slow, melancholic soundtrack lurks in the backdrop. Spinning "For Sale" signs and images of empty, urban skeletons evoke the hollow, artificial cells that await China's influx of urban residents in the newly industrialized cities of Chengdu, Beijing, and Shenzhen. Scenes of grey skies and polluted rivers conjure a post-apocalyptic world derailed by environmental catastrophe – a world that seems unnervingly close to ours. The camera tilts upward, showing the looming, oppressive structures that have become omnipresent symbols of global capitalism, as plumes of orange smoke billow across the screen. *China Tracy* stands among hundred of national flags, symbolizing the flattening ubiquity of our contemporary world under the ineluctable spread of global capitalism. A romance burgeons between *China Tracy* and an edgy, rebellious male avatar, Hug Yue, cornily unfolding according to the familiar tropes of a hackneyed romantic comedy. The couples waltzes at sunset and converses in a moody, empty subway car. When *China Tracy* asks, "Why you enjoy Second Life?" Hug Yue responds, "I am looking for something. I think. But, I don't know what." We are not shown a world of uninhibited, carnivalesque celebration. We see our world. We see our mistakes, uncannily reified in a once untarnished space. We see

our reality, partially reflected and inevitably distorted in a shattered, cybernetic mirror, showing us not who we are, but who we are on the brink of becoming. The mirror speaks to us. With all its might it shouts, “look at what you’ve done!”. It yells at us to turn back – to confront the ghosts of our future, and to listen to the better angels of our present in the hope that we will return to our own world and prevent this future from being realized.

The potential postmodern lightness of this virtual world is fiercely undermined not only by the film’s persistent melancholy, but also by the return of a repressed past – a nagging reminder of its unspeakable failure. Throughout *i.Mirror*, this return takes the form of the commodity. Communist motifs, which harken back to the promise of socialist revolution, reappear on avatars’ shirts, hats, and posters, among other paraphernalia. China Tracy’s lover, Hug Yue, whose real life counterpart is a 64-year-old former Communist from San Francisco, is often seen sporting a t-shirt with a five-pointed red star. Another avatar dons a pin with the recognizable hammer and sickle insignia. Unlike in *Meishi Street* and *24 City*, where the physical remains of this failed revolution is absent, or even repressed, Cao Fei’s work demonstrates a resurfacing of this iconography. This resurgence of a hidden past is most visible in Cao Fei’s related project RMB City. A “condensed incarnation of contemporary Chinese cities with most of their characteristics” and “rough hybrid of communism, socialism, and capitalism,” RMB City is a mash-up of Chinese urban space built entirely in Second Life.<sup>61</sup> RMB City borrows its imagery from the nation’s real metropolises, whose physical architectural symbols of China’s history continue to puncture the cities’ skylines.

---

<sup>61</sup> Cao Fei, “About RMB City – Online Urbanization,” *RMB City*, August 11, 2008, <http://rmbcity.com/about/>.

In RMB City, avatars can ride a ferris wheel that rotates on top of the Monument to the People's Heroes, witness water from the Three Gorges reservoir flow through Tiananmen Square, and view fallen statues of Mao Zedong bobbing in virtual oceans. Chairman Mao's imposing portrait that typically crowns the entrance to the Forbidden City is replaced by a virtual painting of a panda. Through these uncanny juxtapositions, Cao Fei makes visible the seemingly ineffable weight the past carries in our contemporary moment – a time in which the logic of revolution is now taking the rhetorical and ideological guise of capitalism. Still, however unbridled China's current expansion may seem, the country's agency to define a future through the capitalist project is ultimately limited by an inability to fully erase that which came before. In spite of the continual destruction that is attended to in films like *Meishi Street* and *24 City*, the past persists, continually undermining both the rhetoric of progress that characterizes our present moment, as well as our the possibility to find escape in virtual worlds.

Cao Fei's collection of works beautifully encapsulate the relationship to the past for which this paper has been advocating. For Cao Fei, as well as for the people of contemporary China, the relics of traumatic pasts will never simply go away. Neither through a deliberate elision of the twentieth century's greatest catastrophes, as in the Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremony, nor through a reversal of aesthetic forms, as in films like *Meishi Street* and *24 City*, can we avoid an engagement with history. Traumatic recognition in the present moment is predicated on a reckoning with the past. By turning once again to the work of Walter Benjamin and his account of Messianic history, we can locate an alternative vision of time that can liberate us from cycles of violence. "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one." Benjamin writes, "Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that



preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has claim.”<sup>62</sup> Our tendency in the present moment to ignore the warnings of history and to repeat the mistakes of past generations is not inevitable. The past has a hold on us, and it “flashes up at a moment of danger,”<sup>63</sup> compelling us to recognize ourselves in its image. Cao Fei’s work is a conduit for these images from the past, creating the condition of possibility for a moment of “*Jetztzeit*” or “now-time,” in which the past and present exist contemporaneously.<sup>64</sup> “Origin is the goal,” says Karl Kraus, whom Benjamin quotes before his fourteenth thesis.<sup>65</sup> For Benjamin, as well as for Cao Fei, venturing into a future free from violence depends on a return to our origin, a rediscovery of our roots.

This primal return, however, is not simply accomplished by a reawakening of Chinese traditions, ideals, or spaces. The return is an ontological, more fundamentally human one. As I suggest earlier, *Meishi Street* gestures to these kindred ontologies, situating the camera as a mechanism by which the reciprocity of our gazes is revealed. However, a full return to this shared humanness is made fully visible in Cao Fei’s documentary *i.Mirror*. Here, Cao Fei helps us to begin this journey that is at once a voyage into the future and a trip to the past. The film coalesces into its third, and final segment, crescendoing with a surprisingly optimistic, hopeful tone. Through intimate close-ups of various avatars, the camera lingering on their curiously expressive faces, *China Tracy* forces us to confront and acknowledge the human behind each and

---

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin, “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 254.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 261

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

every avatar. For behind each of these alien representations, concealed by these seemingly arbitrary signifiers, there is an individual, a human being with which we must contend. It is easy to throw up our hands in a simple condemnation of our image-saturated landscape – one, we are often told, is an impenetrable, artificial layer of spectacle and simulation. A world in which representations of resounding catastrophe and aching violence are caught up in unceasing storm, piling up like debris at our feet. Just as China Tracy implores *us* to see that avatars are more than just binary code and colorful pixels, she also beseeches the powerful to recognize that we are more than just flesh and bone. We are composed of history, memories, origins, and roots – all of which constitute our humanness and implicate us in one another's very being. It is easy to give up trying to become human in a world that continually seeks to deny us that very right. But China Tracy calls on us to persevere; not only in our attempt to declare our own humanity, but also in our willingness to see that same humanity in others. For only then will we be able to imagine a future in which we are at once individual and collective, woman and machine, virtual and real.

## Bibliography

- “About | RMB City Blogs.” Accessed March 22, 2015. <http://rmbcity.com/about/>.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968.
- — —. “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting.” In *Illuminations*, 59–67. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.
- Bennett, Jill. *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Berry, Chris, and Lisa Rofel. “Alternative Archive.” In *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, 135–54. Hong Kong University Press, 2010.
- Berry, Chris, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel. *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*. Hong Kong University Press, 2010.
- Berry, Michael. *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- — —. *Jia Zhangke’s “Hometown Trilogy”: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*. British Film Institute, 2009.
- — —. *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Bradshaw, Peter. “Film Review: 24 City.” *The Guardian*. Accessed January 25, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/apr/29/24-city-review>.
- Cheung, E. M. K. “Realisms within Conundrum: The Personal and Authentic Appeal in Jia Zhangke’s Accented Films.” *China Perspectives* 2010, no. 1 (2010): 11–20.
- Dargis, Manohla. “Workers’ Past Is Wiped Away in Jia Zhang-Ke’s Film.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2009, sec. Movies. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/05/movies/05twen.html>.
- Galante, Lawrence. *Tai Chi: The Supreme Ultimate*. Weiser Books, 1981.
- Greyser, Stephen A. “The Three Levels of Branding at Beijing.” *Harvard Business Review*. Accessed March 10, 2015. <https://hbr.org/2008/08/branding-at-beijing>.
- Jinhua, Dai, and Judy T. H. Chen. “Imagined Nostalgia.” *Boundary 2* 24, no. 3 (October 1, 1997): 143–61. doi:10.2307/303710.

- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. JHU Press, 2014.
- Leibold, James. "The Beijing Olympics and China's Conflicted National Form." *The China Journal* 63 (January 1, 2010): 1–24.
- McGrath, Jason. "The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic." In *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, 81–114. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (September 21, 1975): 6–18. doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.
- Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26 (April 1, 1989): 7–24. doi:10.2307/2928520.
- Price, Monroe, and Daniel Dayan. *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Qing, Luo, and Giuseppe Richeri. *Encoding the Olympics: The Beijing Olympic Games and the Communication Impact Worldwide*. Routledge, 2013.
- Robinson, Luke. *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Roche, Maurice. *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture*. Routledge, 2000.
- Smith, Briar Rose. "2008 Summer Games: Beijings Image Campaign." Accessed February 22, 2015. [http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/7/2/4/8/p172489\\_index.html?phpsessid=r24jocg97k7kfh9jf9ma95lnq3](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/7/2/4/8/p172489_index.html?phpsessid=r24jocg97k7kfh9jf9ma95lnq3).
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Reprint edition. New York: Picador, 2004.
- Springer, Gary Don Rhodes and John Parris. *Docufictions: Essays On The Intersection Of Documentary And Fictional Filmmaking*. Edited by Gary Don Rhodes and John Parris Springer. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2005.

Swaine, By Jon. "Beijing Olympics: Opening Ceremony Watched by 15 per Cent of World's Population," August 12, 2008, sec. Sport. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/2545106/Beijing-Olympics-Opening-ceremony-watched-by-15-per-cent-of-worlds-population.html>.

Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

Wang, Jing. *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. University of California Press, 1996.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. JHU Press, 1975.

Xiaobing, Tang. *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian*. Duke University Press, 2000.

Xudong, Zhang. "Poetics of Vanishing." *New Left Review*, II, no. 63 (June 2010): 71–88.

Zhang, Xudong. *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema*. Duke University Press, 1997.

— — —. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008.

Zhang, Zhen. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Zheng, Aili, and Jia Zhangke. "Documentary, Fiction, and the Tonalities of Memory: An Interview with Jia Zhangke." *Pacific Coast Philology* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 109–24.

Zhiyan, Wu, Janet Borgerson, and Jonathan Schroeder. *From Chinese Brand Culture to Global Brands: Insights from Aesthetics, Fashion and History*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.



Figure One



Figure Two



Figure Three

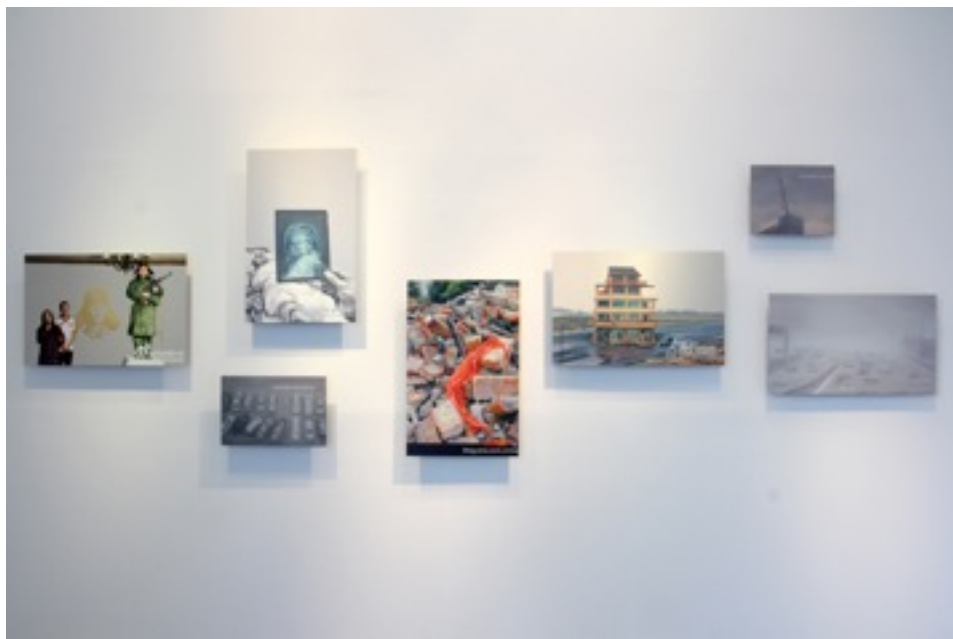


Figure Four